



*Cad's Trilogy*

*Cad's Wish*

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# *CAD'S WISH*

*Book #1 of the Cad's trilogy*

*by Cheryl Holt*

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## CHAPTER ONE

“No. Absolutely not.”

Hunter Stone glared at his father, Neville, but Neville could never be shamed or cowed. He glared back, his expression bland and infuriating.

“Why would you automatically refuse?” Neville asked.

“The answer should be obvious.”

“Not to me.”

They were in his father’s new town house, in his library. Neville was seated behind the massive oak desk, and Hunter was slouched in the chair across from him. The butler had poured them an expensive brandy, and they sipped their beverages, acting cocky and confident, but they recognized the absurdity of the moment.

Neville kept glancing at the door, as if worried guards might burst in and announce that there’d been a huge mistake.

“Let me spell it out for you,” Hunter said. “I have no desire to ever be a husband. It is not a condition that appeals to me in even the slightest way.”

“It wouldn’t kill you.”

“How can you claim that? It almost killed *you*. Twice. You’re not a man who should be touting the benefits of matrimony.”

Neville was a contented widower, having endured two disastrous marriages, both of which he fervently wished he’d never contracted.

The first had been to Hunter’s mother who’d been a pious, bitter harpy, so she’d been precisely the wrong wife for an unrepentant libertine like Neville. She’d struggled valiantly to rein in his penchant for sloth, gambling, and slatterns, but who could truly rein him in? He was a spoiled bully who always picked the path that would deliver the most pleasure.

His second debacle had been to flighty, immature Susan, a pretty girl thirty years his junior with whom he’d had naught in common. But he’d seduced her and had gotten caught, so he’d been dragged to the nearest church by her male relatives.

She’d jumped into the match quite enthusiastically, having had no

notion of what life with Neville would be like. When she'd realized how she'd been tricked, she'd driven him mad with tantrums and pouts.

Hunter had two brothers, Warwick and Sheridan. Warwick was currently on an extended holiday in Scotland, and Sheridan was...

Well, who could guess his whereabouts? They were never sure.

Their mother had died when they were small boys, so they'd grown up like orphans. Neville hadn't been interested in their upbringing, so they'd been handed over to jaded, incompetent, unsupervised servants he'd paid to do the job for him.

They'd enjoyed a wild, unrestrained childhood at Neville's rural estate, and they'd carried on like a trio of abandoned wolf pups. There had been no antic they didn't try, no dare they didn't accept, no exploit they deemed too dangerous to attempt.

The result was that they'd become adults who were just as degenerate and immoral as Neville. Hunter was thirty, Warwick twenty-nine, and Sheridan twenty-eight. They'd adopted all of their father's bad habits, and they shared his disdainful opinion of ethical conduct.

Why walk the straight and narrow when the wicked route was much more amusing?

"I'm not an advocate for matrimony," Neville said. "As my own circumstances have proved, it can be a trap."

"That's putting it mildly," Hunter muttered.

"Our situation has changed though. We have to bite the bullet and sire some heirs."

"I don't see you rushing to the altar. Why not?"

Neville smirked. "I've done my duty to England and produced three strapping sons who are hale and healthy. I don't have to torture myself with a third wife."

"For which I'm certain all the women of the kingdom heartily thank you."

"You boys have to step up and do your part."

Hunter bristled with aggravation. "I don't care about any of this."

"I know, but you're British, and I'm British, so it's in our bones to behave appropriately."

"And the *appropriate* thing would be for me to inflict myself on an unsuspecting female? I would never be that cruel."

He was the most dedicated bachelor in the country. Neville had

supplied a front-row view of the horrors of marriage, and Hunter had vowed to never suffer them.

His great-grandfather had shrewdly invested in numerous commercial ventures that had left the family obscenely wealthy. The money was held in trust accounts and managed by smart accountants who kept it growing like weeds in a flowerbed. It provided all of them with an existence of complete ease and leisure.

Hunter reveled in every depraved sin the demimonde of London had to offer, and he never felt guilty about any of his outrageous deeds.

He always had a mistress, but never for longer than a year. By then, he was impatiently ready to move on to another doxy. During that year, he remained free to trifle with any tart who tempted him. His mistress couldn't be jealous or possessive about it.

There was never a problem convincing any of them to agree to his conditions. With his blond hair, tall height, and muscular physique, he was handsome enough to entice any woman, and with his debauched ways totally entrenched, none of them could resist.

He led a fun and thrilling life, and dissolute trollops were happy to join him in it. When he showered them with his favor, it opened doors and furnished experiences they couldn't have arranged on their own. Of course they all expected to tame him, so he'd fall in love and marry them, but it would never happen.

He was who he was: Neville Stone's corrupt, lazy, entitled son, and he'd never be anybody else.

Neville sighed, and it dawned on Hunter that his father was looking older. He was fifty, and he'd staggered through decades of gambling, vice, and amorous affairs. Apparently, all that reckless living was wearing him down.

"It's shocking to hear myself say this," Neville told him, "but we have an obligation."

"You might have one, and you're obviously feeling a heavy burden, but you can't shuck it off onto my shoulders."

"I never anticipated this ending. I never *wanted* any of it, but it's arrived, and we have to deal with it."

"It's fascinating to me that our male kin were such a feeble, unlucky bunch. If I'd known how weak and ill-fated they were, I'd have rounded them up and locked them in a dungeon to keep them safe."

“There are worse things in the world than being an earl and a viscount.”

“At the moment, I can’t think of any.”

Neville had had three older brothers, all of whom had sired several sons. He’d been perched so low on a thin branch of the family tree that an elevation had never occurred to him.

Yet gradually, one brother, then another had passed away. His nephews had slowly perished too, having been felled by accidents or disease. The last four had died recently, within months of each other, and the astonishing turn of events meant that Neville was suddenly Earl of Swindon.

Hunter was now Viscount Marston and next in line to be earl. It was such an outlandish, startling conclusion that he was surprised it hadn’t sent the Earth spinning off its axis.

“You have to wed, Hunter,” Neville quietly stated. “You don’t have a choice. Neither do Warwick or Sheridan. The three of you have to get busy.”

Hunter shuddered with dread. “Get *busy* with what? Picking a bride and filling a nursery? You’re deranged to imagine I will.”

“We’ve proven ourselves to have a very frail bloodline, and Fate hasn’t been kind. We can’t lollygag and hope for the best.”

Hunter snorted. “Don’t pretend to be worried about the title. I’ll never believe you’re serious.”

“It’s been in our family for three hundred years! What if we all dropped dead tomorrow? Everything our ancestors have built would vanish in an instant.”

“You’re not concerned about any of that.”

“Maybe I’m becoming concerned. Maybe old age is making me wiser and more responsible.”

Hunter laughed caustically. “I can’t fathom how the word *responsible* emerged from your mouth.”

Neville sipped his brandy and stared at Hunter over the rim of the glass. His gaze was cunning and steely. “I repeat: It won’t kill you to be a husband. As far as I’m aware, no man has ever died from matrimony.”

“If you’re about to extol the benefits of having a wife, you probably shouldn’t.”

“I won’t claim it’s a benefit. I’m not demanding this because I



assume you and your brothers will enjoy being husbands. I'm demanding it because it will preserve our name and heritage."

"Bugger our heritage," Hunter crudely spat.

On hearing the callous comment, a pitiful gleam entered his father's eye, so he appeared abashed and even a tad remorseful. "This isn't about matrimony," Neville ludicrously said. "It's about you and me and our legacy. It's about what we owe to our ancestors, and I'm growing old."

"You're a very hale fifty. You hardly have one foot in the grave."

"For some reason, this inheritance matters to me." Neville was being unusually sincere. "I'm determined to protect our wealth and these vast properties that have been handed to me, practically on a silver platter. It just seems as if I should."

"Are your deceased brothers and nephews haranguing at you from the Great Beyond? Are they begging you to step up for a change?"

"They're shouting so loudly I can barely sleep at night."

His father was never earnest. At all times, he was the most self-centered rogue in the kingdom. It was peculiar and intriguing to have him wax nostalgic, but Hunter didn't have to participate in the lamenting.

"You've never listened to anyone," Hunter said. "Not once in your entire, sorry life, so don't start with ghosts."

"I'm turning over a new leaf."

"Liar. I can't figure out what's driving you, but you'll never convince me that you're adopting better morals."

Neville smiled. "All right, I'll stop trying."

"Are we finished?" Hunter asked. "I have a card game waiting for me, and I'd hate to be late for it."

Hunter would have stood and left, but out of the blue, Neville announced, "I've found a possible bride for you."

"You what?"

"I found a viable candidate."

"Since I haven't requested you implement a search, why would you have?"

"Her mother contacted me. It was too coincidental to ignore."

"Well, *I* have no problem ignoring it."

Despite Hunter's snide retort, Neville continued. "Her mother and yours went to school together, and after my ascendancy was in the

newspapers, she wrote to me about her daughter. She was hoping *I* would be interested, but I'm not about to marry again. I wouldn't risk it."

"No, you want to sacrifice me instead—by shackling me to some girl I've never met. It's an absurd idea, and I would never consider it."

Neville shrugged. "I suggested you rather than me, and the woman is amenable. And look at it this way: You wouldn't have to search on your own or hire a matchmaker. You can just agree, then tell your fiancée to plan the ceremony. Your contribution will simply be to walk down the aisle on the appointed morning. It will be easy."

"Except that I'd be wed when it's over. I'd have a wife and I'd be a husband."

"She has a fat dowry, and she owns a good-sized estate. She's quite an heiress, which is always a boon."

"If she's an heiress, why has no one snatched her up already? She must be homely as a mud fence."

"Her mother insists she's pretty."

"Her mother would."

They stared forever, and Hunter couldn't move beyond the fact that Neville appeared tired—and even a bit sad. Perhaps he was finally slowing down and mellowing.

"Won't you oblige me in this, Hunter?" His father's tone was imploring. "I can't remember ever previously asking you for a single thing, but I'm asking this. Please get married. This month—if you can accomplish it that fast."

"You bastard! Don't play on my sympathies, and don't gape at me like a puppy that's lost its mother. You can't coerce me into such a horrendous debacle. It won't work."

"Will it help if I beg?"

"Gad, don't beg! I might be sick at my stomach."

He was irked to find that his father's expression was very riveting. Neville was correct that he'd never asked Hunter for anything. He was so conceited that he never reached out to others. In his view, he was master of his universe, and he didn't require assistance from anyone, especially from a son who'd never exactly been a devoted child.

"Just meet her," Neville said. "What can it hurt?"

Hunter glared, fidgeted, glared again. "What's her name?"

“Miss Graves. Her father was the famous mariner, Sir Edmund Graves. She owns his estate called Parkhurst. It will be given to her husband upon her marriage.”

“Is she a blushing debutante?”

“I don’t believe she’s ever had a Season. Apparently, she hasn’t wanted one.”

“I suppose that’s good news. She must have some sense between her ears.”

Hunter pondered the situation. As with his father, he’d never expected to be thrust into the role of aristocrat, and he was secretly relishing how they’d been raised up. He could envision a line of his sons and grandsons holding Swindon into infinity.

There was such solace in the notion of longevity, so maybe he was just as British as his father had accused him of being.

“I might do it for you,” he muttered. “*I might.*”

“On what condition?”

“She would have to be exceptionally beautiful.”

Neville nodded. “That goes without saying.”

“*Beauty* is non-negotiable.”

Hunter was renowned for dallying with only the most gorgeous trollops, and he refused to have a plain woman by his side. In that, he had exhaustively high standards, and he wouldn’t apologize for them. He was rich, handsome, and incredibly arrogant. Why settle for less than the best?

“May I write to her mother,” Neville said, “and request an introduction?”

“Not yet. It’s a big decision, and I need to think about it. Until I’ve made up my mind, I won’t have you nagging at me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of nagging.” Hunter stood and started out, and Neville said, “Where are you going?”

“To my card game. You’ve distressed me enough for one afternoon.”

“When can I have your answer about Miss Graves?”

“Give me a week. I’ll let you know.”

He strolled out, wondering if he would follow through. A betrothal? A hasty wedding? A wife? Would he jump in and do his part? Or would he be his usual lackadaisical self who couldn’t be bothered?

He had no idea, so he had to engage in some serious introspection.

He scoffed with disgust and kept on without glancing back.

## CHAPTER TWO

Hannah Graves glanced around the packed parlor that encompassed an interesting mix of London's premier citizens, as well as a wide selection of important merchants and tradesmen. In light of the huge crowd, their hostess, Sybil Jones, appeared to be acquainted with most everyone in the city.

Miss Jones managed the notorious *Ralston's* gambling club for her prior ward, Caleb Ralston. He'd recently married in the country, so it was a wedding reception for him and his new bride.

Normally, a female wouldn't have been allowed to run a large commercial venture like *Ralston's*. A typical male owner wouldn't have deemed her smart enough or shrewd enough to handle so much responsibility, but Mr. Ralston trusted her implicitly.

The club members had to accept Miss Jones's role or they had to wager somewhere else.

Hannah had been curious about Mr. Ralston, the peculiar fellow who treated Miss Jones like the capable, intelligent person she was—it was why she'd attended the party—but there were so many people milling that she couldn't push her way over to him to say hello.

She'd met Miss Jones when the older woman had stopped by as a customer at Hannah's shop, *The First Page*. It was a bookshop and lending library she'd started with money inherited from her father when he'd died.

It was very unusual for a young lady to own a business, so whenever anyone rudely complained about it, she claimed a man was actually the proprietor, rather than herself, and that she was closely supervised. The lie kept nosy snoops at bay.

And she wasn't exactly on her own. Her father's lawyer, Mr. Thumberton, was trustee of her bequest, and he had to be consulted about major issues and expenditures, but for the most part, he left her alone to make her own mistakes.

She and Miss Jones had formed an immediate friendship, and Miss Jones had become a mentor of sorts. She'd chartered a private

association for women who were engaged in commerce. They carried on against all odds and in a world dominated by men. None of them could even open a bank account without a man authorizing it, but they plugged away, with varying levels of success.

Hannah knew better than to fraternize with the manager of a gambling club, but Miss Jones was wealthy, powerful, and brilliant, so Hannah was delighted they'd crossed paths.

She was no stranger to affluence and fine living herself. Her father, Sir Edmund Graves, had been a famous sailor and navigator, and through his travels, he'd grown quite rich too. If her life had been plodding down a more ordinary route, she'd never have been introduced to a female as disreputable as Miss Jones, but Hannah's life had never been ordinary. She was honored to have won Miss Jones's regard.

It was hot and stuffy inside the mansion, but there was a verandah and a garden behind it, with lawns that sloped down to the river. She decided to step outside for a few minutes, and she began winding through the bursting mob until, finally, she was pitched out into a deserted hall.

She walked down it, and eventually, she passed a dark parlor with French doors that led out to the verandah. She entered the room and went toward them when, to her great horror, she stumbled on a man and woman who were snuggled in the corner and locked together in a rousing kiss.

She gasped with dismay, and they heard her. They halted and peered over, frowning and obviously irked to have been interrupted.

A candle burned on a table, so she could clearly observe them, and they were two of the most beautiful people she'd ever seen. The woman was buxom and statuesque, her glorious red hair piled high on her head, styled dramatically with flowers and feathers.

Her gown was cut very low in the front, her corset laced very tight, so she was almost falling out of the bodice. She exuded a sultry arrogance that Hannah couldn't have displayed in a thousand years.

The man was even more gorgeous—if that was possible. He was tall and fit, his chest broad, his waist narrow, his legs long. His hair was a striking blond color, the shade of golden wheat at harvest, and it was worn longer than was proper so it curled over his shoulders. She couldn't discern the color of his eyes, but she predicted they would be

very blue.

His fingers were covered with ornate rings that sparkled as if they contained real diamonds. He was dressed formally, in a perfectly-tailored black suit, so he looked elegant and dynamic. Masculine vigor wafted over to where she was standing.

He grinned at her and winked, as if they shared a secret, then he said, "May we help you?"

She was astounded to have him speak to her, and she stammered, "I thought this parlor was empty, and I most humbly beg your pardon."

She lurched over to the French doors and practically somersaulted out onto the patio, and as she straightened and shut the door behind her, the amorous pair snickered, then the woman muttered, "What an annoying little tart..."

Hannah had been sufficiently humiliated for one evening, so she didn't dawdle to eavesdrop. She found some stairs and hurried down into the garden. There were lanterns hanging everywhere, and she strolled down to the river, enjoying the sight of the boats out on the water as they bobbed in the current.

After a bit, she located a bench in a secluded arbor, and she sat down. It had a lovely view of the mansion. The windows were open and aglow from the chandeliers, so she might have been staring at a fairy palace.

Music and laughter drifted out, and in one salon, dancing had started. Couples promenaded and twirled in circles.

She smiled, charmed by the exquisiteness of London's wealthy elite, and she was glad to have been included in such a lofty group. It made her feel as if she hadn't totally abandoned the society into which she'd been born. Perhaps there was still hope for her to stagger back and retrieve a spot in it.

She smelled smoke from a cheroot, and when she glanced around, there was a man nearby in the grass. He was gazing at the mansion too and hadn't noticed her. As she studied him, she realized he was the handsome rogue who'd been nestled with the voluptuous goddess in that dark parlor.

She wasn't keen to have him see her. What could she say that wouldn't sound idiotic? She yearned for him to finish his cigar and return to the house, but she'd never been lucky.

He spun and, suddenly, he was looking right at her. For a moment, they both froze, and there was the eeriest sense in the air that the universe was noting the encounter. The hair on her neck prickled, and she was overcome by the most potent perception that her life was about to change.

It was a terrifying thought that she shoved away.

The past few years, she'd endured plenty of changes, and she hadn't liked any of them. She'd rearranged her world, so there would be no more shocking developments. There was nothing about meeting a handsome man that could alter her quiet existence, so she was being ridiculous. As usual.

He flicked his cheroot away and crushed the flame under the heel of his shoe, then he asked, "Were you spying on me when we were inside?"

The rude question aggravated her, and she answered too petulantly. "Gad, no. I was trying to find an unlocked door. You were just...there. I apologize again for intruding."

"Women watch me constantly," he conceitedly claimed. "Especially now. If you were spying, you can admit it. I won't be upset."

"You are incredibly vain to imagine women watch you, and I categorically state that I stumbled on you purely by accident."

"You don't know who I am? Really?"

"No, I don't know who you are."

He scoffed, then sauntered over and plopped down next to her.

"I didn't invite you to join me," she said.

"I don't care. I never listen to women, and I never do what they want. I'm contrary that way."

"That news does not surprise me."

"What brings you to Sybil's party?" He'd used Miss Jones's Christian name, indicating a heightened familiarity.

"I'm a business associate of hers."

"You? A business associate?"

He gaped, as if the prospect of her being engaged in commerce was too bizarre to be believed, and she said, "It's more correct to say she's a customer of mine. I own a bookshop and lending library. She visits regularly."

"You're a proprietor? How absolutely fascinating. What is your shop



called?"

*"The First Page?"*

"Never heard of it."

His tone was snippy and condescending, but she could be snippy and condescending too when the situation required pomposity. "I wouldn't have pegged you for being much of a reader, so I'm sure you wouldn't have."

He shifted toward her, his focus intimate, probing, and even a tad naughty. "Why books?"

"Why not?"

"There can't be much of a profit in it."

"There's profit enough," she said, which was a huge lie.

At the end of the month, there was never a penny left over, and she operated on the edge of ruin. But then, she never made good choices. How could she have learned to be astute and capable? When had there ever been a role model who might have guided her in a better direction?

She was twenty-five, a spinster getting by as best she could. Her mother had died birthing her, and her father, Sir Edmund, had been a detached parent who'd resided in London. He'd mostly been a stranger to her, and she'd been raised by lazy, inept nannies and governesses.

Most days, she figured she was fortunate she could spell a few words and add a few columns of numbers. Her upbringing had been that unproductive.

"You support yourself?" he asked. "Are you all alone in the world?"

"Pretty much."

And she *was* alone—if she didn't include her stepmother, Amelia, or Amelia's useless husband, Winston. She didn't mention them though. In case he knew either of them, she wouldn't point out her connection to the horrid pair.

"Isn't it scary to be on your own?" he asked. "I've always been told that women are incompetent in all areas and shouldn't be allowed to control any facet of their lives. How can you possibly manage by yourself?"

"I will confess that it's scary on occasion, but would you please not insult me with silly misconceptions about a woman's lack of competence? If you are so ill-informed about my gender, I would rather not hear your opinion on the topic."

He smirked, a dimple creasing his cheek, and she had to concede that it rendered him even more handsome and mesmerizing. Who had sired such a magnificent human specimen? His masculine beauty was exhausting, and she should have leapt up and stomped off, but she stayed right where she was.

He was meticulously assessing her, and she couldn't recall ever being scrutinized so avidly. Particularly by someone who looked like a Greek god. It was a heady sensation to be so thoroughly evaluated.

"You don't want my opinion?" He seemed humored by the notion. "You're a female and I'm a male. You're supposed to welcome whatever comment I deign to share."

"You're quite ridiculous, aren't you?"

"No one but you thinks I am."

"Yes, I'm positive you're deemed to be stupendous," she sarcastically muttered. She didn't like to talk about herself, and men insisted they be the center of attention, so she moved the conversation from her to him. "How are *you* acquainted with Miss Jones?"

"With Sybil? I gamble at her club."

Hannah's jaw dropped. "You're a member?"

"Yes."

"Do you engage in it for sport? Or are you an addicted fool who's about to wager away all his possessions?"

"I'm not addicted, and I couldn't lose all of my possessions if I had a thousand years to try."

She snorted with disgust. Gambling was a terrible scourge among a certain dissolute crowd, and it was the reason she should have detested Miss Jones. It was sinful to encourage such recklessness, but Miss Jones had been kind and helpful to Hannah, so she refused to be snotty or moralistic.

"You simply gamble as a hobby?" she asked.

"Yes, and for the camaraderie."

"May I hope it's your only vice?"

"No. I have dozens of bad habits."

"Dozens of them? I find that hard to believe."

"I'm a notorious character, and you should pray you're not observed sitting with me. Your reputation will never recover."

"I'll just have to risk it," she breezily said. "What are some of your

vices? You look very normal to me. I doubt you're as awful as you claim."

"Well, let's see. I regularly drink to excess, and I race fast, sleek horses. I chase loose women, and I always have a mistress. I'm lazy, impertinent, obnoxiously arrogant, and completely unrepentant over any of my flaws."

She clucked her tongue with offense. "You're deliberately trying to shock me. If I went inside and inquired of Miss Jones, she'd probably tell me you're a pious vicar."

He laughed at that. "I'm not pulling your leg. I am truly one of the most infamous scoundrels in London."

"You declare it as if you're proud to be horrid."

"I'm not proud or embarrassed. It's simply a fact that I've never behaved myself. When *indecent* is so much more fun than decency, what would be the point?"

"Have you a parent who might have molded you into a more proper condition? Or were you incorrigible from the start?"

"My mother died early, so she didn't have a chance to shape my conduct. But my father, in his day, was even more debauched than I am, and I definitely take after him. He's slowing down a bit in what he views as his dotage, so I'm having to carry the torch on his behalf by living down to everyone's low expectations."

"You shouldn't brag about being a scapegrace."

"Should I lie and pretend to be a model citizen instead? Wouldn't it be wrong to hide my proclivities from you? You might assume it was appropriate to chat with me."

"I stand warned, and I must admit that I've never met anyone as shameless as you."

"I could introduce you to my brothers. Or my father. My dreadful tendencies run in the family."

"You must have some intriguing relatives."

"Or perhaps it's just a very corrupted bloodline."

"Perhaps. Who was the woman you were kissing in that parlor? Is she a trollop? Are there doxies roaming the halls and I wasn't apprised?"

"There are plenty of doxies in attendance, but then, Sybil manages a gambling club after all. She's not exactly surrounded by saints."

“No, I imagine not.”

“And since you’re curious, the woman in the parlor is my current mistress.”

She studied him, and she couldn’t deduce if he was teasing her or not. “Your mistress?” She scoffed at the very idea. “You brought her to Miss Jones’s party? Are you hoping to distress me by announcing it? If so, I can’t fathom why you would.”

“I’m not trying to distress you. I’m merely being honest about who’s here. You don’t seem to realize the base caliber of many of the guests.”

“Apparently not, and *you* are the worst of the lot.”

He grinned a devastating grin. “Most of the men were accompanied by their mistresses, rather than their wives. It’s the reality of Sybil’s world. As I mentioned, she’s not friendly with saints. They’re not allowed to gamble at her establishment.”

Hannah sighed with dismay. When she’d accepted Miss Jones’s invitation, it had never occurred to her that scandalous people would make up the bulk of the guests, but she should have guessed. It was just that it had been an eternity since she’d worn a pretty gown, since she’d styled her hair, since she’d reveled at a fancy gathering.

She hadn’t been able to resist the opportunity, and she wouldn’t question her decision. If she rubbed elbows with a few libertines, it wouldn’t kill her. Immoral behavior was not a disease that was catching.

He shifted even nearer so their arms and thighs were touching all the way down. He was being much too forward, and she supposed she appeared naïve and provincial to him. She suspected he’d have a week of laughs at her expense.

“What is your opinion?” he said. “Are you the only ordinary person here tonight?”

She scowled. “Who wants to be referred to as *ordinary*?”

“That was an awkward choice of word, wasn’t it? How about this: Are you the only honorable person here?”

“From what you’ve told me, it’s beginning to sound like it, although I expect the new Mr. and Mrs. Ralston are extremely honorable too.” They were the newlyweds for whom Miss Jones was hosting the fete.

“Well, Mrs. Ralston is honorable anyway. I’ve been acquainted with Caleb Ralston for years, and he’s a disgraceful wretch.”

“How awful of you to denigrate him in his own home.”

“Have you met him?”

“No. I would have introduced myself, but I was too short to push through the crowd.”

“He’s not quite as depraved as I am, but he’s a close second.”

She glared with exasperation. “I won’t gossip about him, and I think I should head back inside.”

“Have I upset you?”

“No. I just don’t like you very much, so I don’t wish to tarry.”

It was a horrid comment, the type she never uttered, but he was vain, arrogant, and very much out of her league. There could never be a benefit to dawdling with such a degenerate man.

“My goodness!” he said. “You don’t *like* me? Women always love me. Why don’t you?”

“You’re a scoundrel, and you’re working hard to make me blush, and I view it as reprehensible conduct. Would you excuse me?”

“No, I don’t excuse you.”

He leaned in and pressed her into the bench. If she’d been a wilting violet, she might have been terrified as to his intentions, but she sensed no menace. He was smiling, his eyes glittering with mischief.

“What color is your hair?” he absurdly asked.

“What an odd question.”

“It’s so dark that I can’t tell for sure.”

“It’s sort of brown and sort of lighter than that.”

He frowned. “That’s no color at all. Is it red?”

“No. Chestnut is a prettier description.”

“When you pull out the combs, is it curly and wild?”

“Yes—if you must know.”

“Who did you inherit it from? Your mother?”

“Yes.” She’d died when Hannah was a baby, and no portrait of her was ever painted, so Hannah had had to rely on hearsay.

“What about your eyes? What color are they?”

“Green.”

“Emerald green?”

“I guess that would be correct.”

He stunned her by reaching out and grabbing a strand of her hair that had slipped from her chignon. She didn’t normally try to control it—it was too much of a bother to pin it up—so she usually tied it with a

ribbon. He wrapped the strand around his finger, and he drew her to him so he could study it more closely.

For the strangest instant, Time seemed to stop, and she was once again riveted by the distinct perception that the universe was marking the peculiar interval. As to herself, she was frozen with excitement.

England was a world of blond, blue-eyed girls, so she was very rare, and while her stepmother, Amelia, insisted she stood out when she shouldn't, Hannah believed her hair was marvelous. She'd had so few opportunities in her life to be noticed, and she felt unique in a way she never had prior.

"You're a very...*interesting* female," he eventually said.

"It took you long enough to settle on an adjective."

"I thought I should be careful not to pick the wrong one."

"Must I be labeled merely as *interesting*? Perhaps I'd like to be told that I'm fabulously exotic."

"Are you?"

"No."

They chuckled, then he released her and eased away. Their proximity had stirred the air around them, so it fairly crackled with energy, and she'd spend weeks pondering the thrilling encounter.

"Shouldn't you go inside?" she asked. "Won't your mistress be searching for you? She can't like it that you're loitering in the garden with another woman."

"Isabella doesn't get to complain when I'm flirting with someone else."

"She's very understanding then, and we're not flirting. I don't know what we're doing, but it's not flirting."

"Yes, it is," he said. "I'm a renowned cad, and I try to seduce every female who crosses my path. It's my wicked nature poking through. Am I having any success with you?"

She bristled with irritation. "You, sir, are too ridiculous to abide, and this conversation is over."

She slid to her feet, and he startled her by clasping hold of her wrist. She stared him down, her expression annoyed and aghast, his confident and cocky.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Miss Graves."

At her proclaiming her identity, he blanched and jerked away, almost as if he'd been burned.

"Did you say *Miss Graves*?"

"Ah...yes?"

"By any chance, are you the Miss Graves who owns an estate in the country called Parkhurst?"

"Yes, and how odd of you to inquire. I can't suppose my reputation preceded me to town."

"Miss Graves from Parkhurst," he mumbled to himself. "I'll be damned..."

"Please don't curse in my presence." Her tone was prim and scolding. "I don't like foul language."

His hot gaze rose to the top of her head, then meandered down her torso. When he finished, he appeared very smug, as if he'd deduced all her secrets.

"I must admit to being incredibly surprised," he said, which made no sense.

"May I ask *your* name? Dare I learn it?"

"I'm Hunter Stone." He announced it dramatically, as if he'd imparted special news that would delight her. "Viscount Marston?"

"A viscount? My, my, I simply thought you were a common scoundrel. Now I discover—to my horror—that you're an aristocratic scoundrel."

"You don't know who I am?"

"No, sorry. I have no idea. Why? Have we met previously and I've forgotten? I can be flighty that way."

"No, we haven't met, but I'm happy to report that you'll do just fine, Miss Graves. In fact, you'll be perfect."

She had no idea to what he referred, and she wasn't about to dawdle and pry out an explanation. She'd been drooling over him much too avidly, the end result being that he was a noble cad rather than an ordinary one.

They were all nobly corrupt, and respectable women trifled with them at their peril.

"All righty then," she said. "It's been fascinating to verbally spar with you, but I should get back to the party."

"I refuse to let you leave."

She rolled her eyes. “Are you bossing me, Viscount Marston? If you imagine you can, you are sadly mistaken as to the sort of person I am.”

“Yes, I’m definitely bossing you. Stay and talk with me a bit more. I intend to pepper you with questions about your tastes and attitudes.”

“I’m certain this will crush your massive ego, but when I told you I don’t like you, I wasn’t jesting. And with the revelation that you’re an aristocrat, I like you even less.”

“Honestly, Miss Graves, I don’t believe I’ve ever been so thoroughly insulted.” He snickered with amusement, as if he was greatly humored by her. “How have I incurred so much of your wrath?”

“You mean besides being condescending, patronizing, and obnoxious since the moment you sat down?”

“Yes, besides all that.”

“Goodnight, Lord Marston. I would say it’s been lovely meeting you, but it really hasn’t been.”

She yanked away and marched toward the manor. She hadn’t taken a dozen steps, when he called, “Miss Graves!”

She glared over her shoulder. “What?”

“I’ll see you again very soon.”

“Not if I can help it,” she muttered.

She whipped away and kept on.



## CHAPTER THREE

“Was it worth it?”

“Absolutely, yes.”

“I’m glad then.”

Hannah forced a smile at her younger half-brother, Jackson. He was fourteen and had been dumped on her doorstep a few months earlier by a grouchy vicar who’d demanded Hannah take charge of him.

He was her father’s bastard son, a situation that hadn’t necessarily surprised her. After Sir Edmund’s death, she’d learned that he’d been a notorious roué. It was likely he had many natural children out there in the world, but for the moment, Jackson was the sole one who’d appeared.

His mother had been a doxy whom Sir Edmund had adored for a short period. She’d fallen on hard times, then had passed away after an extended illness. Jackson had been living in dire circumstances, and he’d had no other relatives to offer shelter. Hannah had been the only person available, and she hadn’t debated whether she should pitch in.

She’d viewed it as her Christian duty, but also, her family was small and shrinking in size, and she’d welcomed the opportunity to increase its ranks with a new member. Jackson was her brother, and she was ignoring the dubious conduct of the two people who’d created him.

He’d grown up with little supervision, so he was an interesting boy. He’d often scrounged for food and fought for what he needed, so he was tough and smart—and a tad ruthless too.

Being vigilant and watchful, he tracked the tiniest details, as if afraid tragedy would strike when he wasn’t paying attention. He was pensive and rarely talked about the desperate years with his mother. If he was grateful to Hannah for allowing him to stay with her, she had no idea. Every morning, she expected to discover his bed empty and that he’d run away.

They shared the same facial features, with him having her same smile and dimples, but where she had her mother’s chestnut hair and green eyes, he was blond and blue-eyed like their father. His body was

slender and lanky, and he was her same height of five-foot-five, but she suspected he'd shoot up and be broad and strapping as Sir Edmund had been.

She yawned, and he said, "You got home late."

"It was almost one o'clock, and I'm not used to such wild entertainment. I'll probably walk around in a fog all day."

"I'll lurk behind you to be sure you don't trip over any hidden objects."

She chuckled at that. They were in their apartment over her bookshop that was located on the street down below. They'd just had breakfast, and she was about to head down and open for business. It was always a pleasure, where she was able to remind herself that she was engaged in a valuable activity.

When she'd thrown up her hands and had fled Parkhurst, she could have carried on in town as a contented spinster. She'd had the funds—if she'd been thrifty—to reinvent herself as a lady of leisure, but she hadn't been keen to loaf and waste time by making social calls and planning charity events.

Yet now that she'd been confronted by the difficult aspects of commerce, she frequently wondered if she shouldn't have traveled that less-risky path. But she'd wanted to prove to herself that she was competent, that she could thrive in the world just as a man could.

The jury was still out on whether she'd succeed or not, and if the shop failed, she'd have to slither back to Parkhurst with her tail between her legs. She refused to have that be her sorry conclusion.

"Did you meet Mr. and Mrs. Ralston?" Jackson asked.

"The house was so packed that I didn't have a chance to speak with them. I didn't say goodbye to Miss Jones before I left either. I tried to find her, but it was impossible in the large crowd."

"Did you dance?"

"No, but I chatted with a viscount."

"My, my, was he quite grand?"

"*He* thought he was grand, but in reality, he was rude and insulting, and I didn't like him."

For some reason, she'd been avidly pondering Viscount Marston, but she couldn't figure out why. Most likely, it was because it had been an eternity since she'd stumbled on a handsome bachelor. He was

gorgeous, dissolute, and incredibly vain, but she was so pitifully lonely and insecure that she'd reveled in the encounter.

"You have humorous notions about people," he said. "My mother always told me to be really, really nice to a rich nob like him. They're the only ones with money, so they're the only ones who can shower us with some of it."

"He's a notorious scoundrel; he even bragged that he was. A woman like me could never be friends with a man like him. In fact, women like me should avoid men like him at all costs. He was a menace who would have stirred trouble and scandal."

Jackson grinned in a way that indicated she was being silly. Because of his unstructured upbringing, they viewed things very differently. She often considered prying into the types of experiences that had shaped him, but the vicar who'd conveyed him to her door had whispered that he'd been battered by life and she should tread cautiously in dredging up any memories.

They tiptoed around each other, and she felt as if he was a wolf pup that had been captured in the forest and domesticated so it could live with humans. And of course, she was clueless as to how to be a parent. She'd had no role models to provide any guidance, so she staggered about and hoped for the best.

"I have to open up," she said. "Will you help out today?"

"I'll think about it."

He occasionally performed chores, dusted shelves, moved boxes, or delivered packages, but he didn't like the tedium they presented. Usually, he disappeared for hours. When she questioned him later as to where he'd been, he'd have vague answers such as how he'd been *here and there*, but he never firmly clarified his whereabouts or who he'd been with.

She should have been more adamant in demanding explanations, but she didn't want to upset him where he'd leave and not come back.

It was July and mid-summer, but she'd insisted, after autumn arrived, he would have to sit down and have some schooling. He'd received some education, so he could read and write, but he thought the prospect of further instruction was ridiculous.

If she mentioned hiring a tutor for him, he would smile and nod, but she was sure—in the end—he'd ignore her and continue on however he

pleased.

She descended to the shop, and he followed, silently observing as she puttered around and prepared to greet her customers. The place was messy and crammed to the rafters, the aisles narrow, the shelves high, but she loved the smell of paper and ink, and when she inhaled it, she always paused to remember that she was very lucky.

She could have still been at Parkhurst, constantly bickering with her stepmother, Amelia, or incessantly raging at Amelia's husband, Winston. Or she could have been shaking her head over her half-sister, poor, dull, Rebecca. Rebecca was Amelia's daughter, the one child she'd managed to birth for Sir Edmund, but she was so quiet and slow-witted that Hannah despaired for her future.

Hannah had escaped, and she could never forget how fortunate she was to have accomplished it.

Time sped by, with a steady stream of customers for once. She had a male clerk as her sole employee, so she was able to sneak to her office to add and subtract numbers, but the task simply had her wincing with alarm over how she dangled on a fiscal cliff.

In the past, if she went bankrupt, she'd only had herself to worry about. She'd have trudged home to Parkhurst, a pathetic failure. Now, she had Jackson to protect, so she had to do a better job of handling her affairs.

It was the middle of the afternoon when the hair on her neck began to prickle. She was at the rear of the shop, retrieving a book, and she glanced about to discover what had caused the odd reaction. To her great dismay, Viscount Marston was at the other end of the aisle.

He was causally leaned against a stack of books and watching her intensely. He was grinning, as if he knew a secret she didn't.

"Miss Graves!" He straightened and started toward her. "We meet again."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was so impressed to hear that you own a business and run it by yourself. I had to witness the spectacle for myself."

"You bestirred yourself for that? Why don't I believe you?"

He kept coming until she was wedged into a corner, and he stood so close that the toes of his boots slipped under the hem of her skirt. She was assailed by his proximity. He was much taller than she was, and he

towered over her.

He was more handsome than she recalled—if that was possible. Dressed for riding, he was wearing leather trousers and a blue coat. He had a jaunty kerchief tied around his throat, and his glorious blond hair had been mussed by the wind.

He looked deliciously virile, and manly vigor practically oozed out of him. She could have dawdled forever, letting him ogle and annoy her. The moment was positively divine.

She placed her palms on his chest and tried to ease him away, but his torso was hard as a rock, and she couldn't budge him.

"Are you glad to see me?" he asked.

"No. Why would I be?"

"You claim you don't like me, but we're scarcely acquainted, so your attitude is ludicrous. How can I wipe away your disregard?"

"There's no reason for us to be cordial, and I can't fathom why you'd stop by to antagonize me. In my view, you're simply used to having women throw themselves at your feet. I haven't prostrated myself, and you can't abide it."

She thought he'd deny the charge, but he nodded. "Precisely. You're not in awe of me, and I'm irritated."

"Have I pointed out that you are incredibly absurd?"

"I think so."

"I stand by my prior assessment."

To her shock—and also a bit of delight—he stepped nearer so his body was crushed to hers all the way down. She was awash with heady sensation. It was no mystery why women drooled over him, but she was made of sterner stuff. He might be handsome, dynamic, and mesmerizing, but she wouldn't become a fawning admirer.

"Why are you in London by yourself?" he asked. "Don't you have family in the country? Don't any of them care about you?"

He'd raised a thorny topic, and if she'd felt like explaining—which she definitely didn't—she could have talked for ages about the wretched state of the situation at Parkhurst.

Her mother had died when she was born, and her father had remarried to Amelia when Hannah was seven. Her new stepmother had been just sixteen herself, a dreamy, foolish debutante fresh out of the schoolroom, so she was only nine years older than Hannah.

Sir Edmund had wed Amelia, then decided he didn't like her. He'd deposited her at Parkhurst, then he'd continued reveling in town. Amelia had no maternal tendencies and had never been interested in mothering Hannah. They'd never gotten along.

Amelia had birthed Rebecca for Sir Edmund, and on the limited occasions she'd exhibited any parental conduct, it had always been focused on Rebecca. Not that Hannah minded. Any attention Amelia showered on Hannah was dispensed for negative purposes: to criticize, to complain, to condemn.

Sir Edmund had perished—in a doxy's bed—when Hannah was eighteen and Amelia twenty-seven. The day after his funeral, her current husband, Winston Webster, had moved in with them. He'd been a tutor to Amelia's brother when she was a girl, and he'd glommed onto her the minute she was widowed.

Amelia had married him a short month later, when Sir Edmund was barely cold in the ground. The hasty nuptials had fomented gossip all over the neighborhood, and with Rebecca just happening to look like Winston, rather than Sir Edmund, it was assumed Amelia had been unfaithful to Sir Edmund and Rebecca was Winston's daughter.

If that was the case, then she wasn't Hannah's half-sister. Whatever the truth of the matter, Amelia's reputation had been shredded, and they were pariahs.

Winston was a cunning fiend who manipulated and pressured Amelia into obeying his every command. Hannah had grown so sick of them that she'd given up and had fled to London. She never went home unless it was an outright emergency.

She worried about Rebecca though. Amelia browbeat her, and Winston mocked and reprimanded her until she was a trembling wreck. Hannah often wondered if she shouldn't ask Rebecca to come to town and stay with her, but she was certain Amelia would never allow it.

It would also mean Hannah would have another person to support, so she hadn't extended the invitation.

"If you must know—" she started.

"I must."

"I'm here because I didn't want to waste my life in the country."

"How would your life there have been wasted?"

"I was bored silly, and I hated the tedium. It drove me quite mad."

“You didn’t fill the hours with sewing and knitting?”

“No, and I must repeat that you’re absurd. I realize, in your world, it’s common for women to do as little as possible, but in my world, there are actually women who like to be busy and make a difference.”

“How can you make a difference by selling books? How is it a benefit to anyone?”

“If you don’t comprehend the joy people receive from reading, then I can’t explain it to you. I’ve already deduced that you’re a barbarian, so I’m not surprised that you would fail to recognize the boon I provide to others.”

He’d hurt her feelings, and she was very angry, but she was determined not to show it. He was a vain, entitled oaf, and he was pestering her for no reason she could discern. If he discovered that he’d distressed her, he’d become even more of a nuisance.

“Are we finished?” she asked. “I have to get back to work.”

“Why haven’t you wed before now?”

She sighed. “That is a very private question, and I shouldn’t have to answer it.”

“Tell me. I’m curious.”

“Well, I’ve never previously met a man who could tolerate me.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” he agreed. “With that sharp tongue and bitter attitude of yours, what man could stand you?”

“Exactly, and I’m not sharp or bitter. I’m shrewd and discriminating.”

“If you say so.”

“In order for me to wed, I would have to find someone who had an ego that wouldn’t deflate the instant he noticed I was smarter than he was. He’d have to listen to me and be kind. He’d have to feel that I mattered and that I was worth having.”

He smirked. “Are you a romantic at heart?”

“No. I’m a realist, and there is no man alive who would treat me that way.”

“If you stumbled on that kind, sympathetic fellow, you’d be thrilled to proceed. Is that what I’m hearing?”

She didn’t have a chance to respond. From behind them, Jackson suddenly said, “Hannah, can you help me in the storage room?”

Lord Marston didn’t step away from her, but glanced around to see

who'd spoken. Jackson glared at him with a steely expression that was disturbing. Lord Marston was taller, broader, and much older, but Jackson was visibly bristling, as if spoiling for a fight. The boy wasn't afraid of anything, which was terrifying.

"I'll be there in a minute," she said to him.

"Is this gentleman bothering you?" Jackson asked.

She nearly said *yes*, that Marston was bothering her, but she suspected Jackson would march down and punch him in the nose.

"No, I'm fine." She gestured to Lord Marston. "This is Hunter Stone. Viscount Marston? I told you about him, and he's just leaving."

Jackson hovered a moment, then a moment more, and his ferocious gaze was locked on Marston, as if she had her very own guard dog. Then he strolled off, and Hannah relaxed.

Lord Marston spun back to her. "You were talking about me? I like the sound of that."

"Since I view you as being annoying and horrid, I wasn't being complimentary."

"Who was he?"

"My younger brother, Jackson."

"He resides with you?"

"Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

"He seems a little fierce."

She scowled. "We're close, and he's very protective."

The tepid remark didn't describe her relationship with Jackson at all, but as with Amelia and Winston, she wasn't about to clarify her convoluted familial issues for him.

If she was lucky, and she hadn't been so far, she'd never see him again. There was nothing interesting about her, so hopefully, he'd grow bored and depart.

"What are you doing this evening?" he asked out of the blue.

"Dining with my brother, then going to bed early so I can get up in time for church tomorrow."

"I could have predicted you'd be pious."

"And I could have predicted you wouldn't be."

"Let's have supper together. I'll pick you up in my carriage at eight."

"Absolutely not. We're not socializing."

"Where do you live?"



“Upstairs—not that it’s any of your business.” She frowned. “Is there some reason I’ve fascinated you? For the life of me, I can’t figure out what’s happening.”

“You don’t know? Seriously?”

“No, and you really need to leave. I’m busy so I can’t chat and play.”

“Your boss must be an ogre.”

The comment made her laugh. “She definitely is.”

He still hadn’t stepped away, and she hadn’t moved either. She could have, but apparently, her anatomy was delighted to be stuck right where it was.

“I guess our having supper is not in the cards,” he said.

“You’ve guessed correctly.”

“I’ll have plenty of opportunities to coerce you in the future, so I’ll oblige you this once. You shouldn’t think I’m a milksop though. Or that I’ll let you run roughshod over me.”

She facetiously batted her lashes. “I would never think that. You’re such a manly fellow. I wouldn’t dare consider it.”

He stared down at her, and though it was bizarre to assume it, she received the distinct impression that he might kiss her. The notion was strange and unbelievable, but she was certain it was what he was contemplating.

She’d been kissed several times in the past. It had occurred when she’d been an adolescent, before she’d begun to disdain males as negligent fools, so she recognized the amorous signs. He was tantalized by her!

The prospect was thrilling and absurd, but she couldn’t recollect when a man had last noticed her, and his heightened attention stroked her enormous vanity. He wasn’t the only one with a massive ego.

In the end, he didn’t proceed, and she had to admit she was disappointed. He looked like he’d know how to kiss a woman, and she’d have enjoyed it very much.

He clicked his heels and bowed with a flourish. “I plan on seeing you again very soon.”

“I can’t imagine why you’d pine for another meeting. So far—in my opinion anyway—our encounters have been exhausting.”

“You’ll wind up being excited that I’ve bothered with you,” he said,

like the cocky beast he was. "I swear it."

He spun away and sauntered out. Like a besotted ninny, she staggered after him, watching avidly until he climbed into his carriage and it rolled away. As he vanished around the corner, Jackson appeared at her side.

He stated the obvious. "He was being incredibly forward."

"I have no idea why. I haven't given him the least bit of encouragement, and I've constantly told him he's obnoxious and unlikable."

"He probably hopes to seduce you. My mother used to be enthralled by rogues like him. He likely has a bet with his dissolute chums about whether he can ruin you."

"You're fourteen. You shouldn't toss out words like *seduce* and *ruin*."

"He's a cad." Jackson shrugged, as if he'd just clarified a deep truth. "I could find out if there's a salacious wager in the works."

"How would you?"

"I could befriend his coachmen or his stable boys. They'd have heard about it."

"I'm sure it's nothing so immoral as all that. He's simply bored, so he's pestering me."

"Be careful. If he returns, call for me. You shouldn't be alone with him."

"I'm always careful, and he hasn't furnished me with a reason to be scared of him."

"Not yet." His tone was filled with warning, and she was sad to realize he was so young, but already so jaded. He held out his hand and said, "The mail came while you were talking to him. I thought you should have these right away."

There were two letters. One was from Amelia and one was from Rebecca. They never contacted her with good news, and her mind raced as she tried to envision the catastrophe that had erupted.

She lurched over to a nearby chair and plopped down, and she glared at them, wishing she had magical eyes so she could peer inside without opening them.

"Shall I read them for you?" he asked.

"No, I can do it." She flicked the seal on the one from Amelia, and

the message was curt and cold.

“Has something bad happened?” he asked.

“I can’t decide how to view it,” she said. “Amelia has contracted a marriage for Rebecca.”

“To whom?”

“She didn’t feel the need to apprise me.”

He was intrigued by Rebecca, his other half-sister he hadn’t met, and he wrinkled up his nose. “Rebecca is sixteen, and she just finished her schooling. Would she like to wed?”

“I don’t know, but her intended fiancé is traveling to Parkhurst next week to propose. Amelia wants me there.”

“Why must you be there? You’re not the one who’ll be shackled to him.”

“I can never unravel Amelia’s convoluted thinking, so I can’t guess why she’d demand my presence. Perhaps she’s simply eager to rub it in my face that Rebecca will be a bride before me, but it’s a mystery as to why she’d suppose I’d be jealous about it.”

She opened the letter from Rebecca, and on perusing her sister’s frantic entreaty, she sighed.

*Please come to Parkhurst! Don’t let Mother force me into this!*

“What does Rebecca say?” he asked.

“She’s terrified, and she’s begging me to help her avoid the engagement.”

“Can you? Should you? Will you?”

She sat for an eternity, weighing her options, debating her choices.

She couldn’t abide Amelia or Winston, and they’d wrecked any fond affection she’d ever possessed for Parkhurst. But if she understood one fact about them, it was that they would never have Rebecca’s best interests at heart.

If they were pursuing a betrothal for her, then Winston likely had a scheme brewing that would resolve to Rebecca’s detriment. Could Hannah stand idly by and allow him to harm Rebecca?

She sighed again, then looked over at Jackson. “It appears we’re going to Parkhurst.”

“Me too?”

“Yes. You’ve been curious about it, and now, you’ll have the chance to see it.”

“Won’t your stepmother be incensed to have me there?”

“She will be, but Parkhurst is mine, and if I bring you with me, it’s none of her business.”

Amelia had been having a lengthy affair with Winston during her marriage to Sir Edmund, but Sir Edmund had been having an affair too, and Jackson was the result. He was Sir Edmund’s son, and he would be welcomed at Parkhurst. Hannah would insist on it, and if Amelia didn’t like it, she could choke on her own bile.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"You've met Miss Graves. Will you propose?"

"Yes, next week." Hunter scowled at his father and said, "Is there a *thank you* in there somewhere?"

"Yes, thank you," Neville replied.

"I don't expect she'll accept though."

"Why wouldn't she? You're a bloody viscount, and someday, you'll be an earl. In the past, you weren't much of a catch, but with our elevation, any girl in the land would be eager to be your bride."

"Her mother hasn't informed her of the engagement."

"How bizarre. Why wouldn't she have?"

"That's a pertinent question, isn't it?"

"Her mother probably didn't want to mention it until she was sure you were interested."

"I hope that's what is happening, for I suspect it will be difficult for her mother to persuade her."

"You now hold the very lofty position of being the oldest son of the Earl of Swindon. Of course she'll agree."

"She has some very firm opinions about men and matrimony. Namely, she thinks we're all fools, and she intends to remain a spinster."

Neville scoffed. "What a perfectly absurd attitude. It's unnatural for a female to shun marriage. Everyone knows that."

They were seated at a table in a private salon at *Ralston's* gambling club where they were premier members. A few other players, friends of Neville's, were strolling in and cards were about to be dealt.

Hunter had other business for the evening, but he'd had to talk to his father about Miss Graves, and on a Saturday night, *Ralston's* was the only place to find him.

As Neville voiced his remark about the nuptial state, the club's manager, Sybil Jones, walked by. She smirked and said, "Neville, you are more ridiculous by the minute. Women wed because they don't have a choice, but there is a whole collection of us who can't abide any of you, and we refuse to be shackled. I'm the most blatant example."

Sybil was forty and a spinster herself. She was independent and strong-willed, and any man who might have been stupid enough to bind himself to her would be swiftly emasculated.

"I didn't mean you, Sybil," Neville told her.

"Oh, do be silent." Sybil turned to Hunter and said, "You're about to wed? Who is the lucky girl?"

"Miss Graves? I believe you're acquainted with her. She was at your party."

"You're marrying Miss Graves?" Sybil flashed a sly smile he couldn't decipher. "I wasn't aware she was planning to betroth herself, so it must be a recent decision."

"Her mother contacted Neville about it. I like her, but I'd love to hear your opinion."

"I like her too, but she's too good for you. She's much smarter than you are, and she's trustworthy, kind, and loyal to a fault, so the two of you have nothing in common. What is her family thinking by picking you? They must not have researched your background."

"My suddenly becoming a viscount wipes away many of my sins," Hunter said. "At the moment, she's a tad reticent, but I'll grow on her."

Sybil rolled her eyes. "You Stone men are the vainest oafs in the kingdom."

"We've never denied it."

"She must have money," Sybil said, "or you wouldn't consider her. I'm stunned that she has any assets to offer."

"She's actually quite an heiress," Neville said. "She owns the estate where she was raised. Parkhurst? The property will pass to her husband as part of her dowry."

Sybil was dubious. "If she's so wealthy, why is she working in London?"

"I asked her the very same," Hunter said, "and she claims she hates to be lazy. She boasts that she's making a difference in the world, although how she's accomplishing it by selling books to strangers is a mystery to me."

"You've just proved my point," Sybil said. "The two of you would be the worst mismatch in history."

His father scolded her. "Don't badger him, Sybil. He has to wed, and he has to do it quickly. If he's happy with Miss Graves, we shouldn't

dissuade him.”

“I’m not trying to dissuade him,” Sybil insisted. “Miss Graves is very sweet, and if Hunter is to be her fate, I feel sorry for her. She’s doomed to a life of misery.”

Neville frowned at Sybil and said, “Don’t you dare warn her off before he can get the matter concluded.”

“I wouldn’t dream of interfering,” Sybil responded. “I adore it when a leg-shackle is attached to a scoundrel. It will be amusing to watch, and who knows? Perhaps Hunter will blossom as a husband.”

They froze, the three of them pondering the unlikely prospect, then they burst out laughing.

“He’ll be better at it than I was,” Neville staunchly declared.

“What a very low bar,” Sybil said.

Hunter was irked to have them assume he’d fail at matrimony. He was very competitive, and their derogatory comments had him determined to win Miss Graves—merely so he could show them how wrong they’d been.

He left them to their cards. They’d lit a spark to his temper, and he was in no mood to continue loafing while they chided him over what a useless spouse he’d be. He’d never failed at any endeavor he attempted, so he expected he’d be as good at marriage as he was at everything else.

He went to the front door and had a footman wave down a hansom cab. He climbed in and was delivered to his favorite brothel. It was another private club that catered to only the richest, most discerning gentlemen.

For once, he hadn’t come for carnal entertainment. The proprietor was letting him use a salon to conduct his annual mistress interviews. Among the lechers of his social circle, they were the stuff of legends. Other men weren’t as handsome or as debauched as he was, and they envied his audacity. Some even copied his antics, but they couldn’t pull them off with his aplomb.

His annual search was raucous fun. There were huge wagers over which girl would capture his fancy, and the finalists enjoyed a brief spurt of fame for being singled out.

He always kept a mistress, but never for longer than a year. He was easily bored and liked variation in his vices. His current mistress, Isabella Darling, was running out of days, and he was hunting for her

replacement. He was relieved to be moving on from her. She was overly possessive, and he didn't like any female to hold on too tightly. In that, he was exactly like his father.

There were moralistic people who were disgusted by his flagrant reveling with trollops, by his picking one for a year, then setting her aside for somebody new. But he never tricked or lied to any of the women who applied. He was frank about the time limit, and they entered into the arrangement of their own free will.

In his view, they were lucky when he focused his attention on them, and monogamy had never been a Stone family trait. There were simply too many beautiful women, and he intended to dally with as many of them as possible while he was young and virile enough to misbehave.

Did that indicate he was horrid? Yes, but in his own defense, he'd never claimed to be a saint. He wallowed in the demimonde, a spot where those around him were just as corrupt as he was.

If there were occasions when he was tired of his frivolous life and the craven dolts with whom he gamboled, he didn't have to heed his misgivings. He was fine. He was content with his lot, and he had no desire to change.

He strolled into the room that had been supplied, and his friend, Nate Carew, was waiting for him. They were both thirty, but that was the extent of their similarities. Hunter was wealthy. Nate wasn't. Hunter was tall, handsome, and dashing. Nate was short, chubby, and annoying. Hunter was cheerful and engaging. Nate was morose and pessimistic.

He was always broke too, and Hunter regularly loaned him money. Hunter didn't mind being generous, but Nate had begun to count on it in a manner that was irritating.

Dissipation was wearing him down, so he wasn't aging well. His dark eyes were dull, his dark hair thinning, and there was a bald patch on the top that was visible.

It was probably odd that they were close, but they'd been in the same army regiment during the absurd period when Hunter had believed he could become a decent human being if he served his country. Early on, he'd relished the camaraderie, the daring-do, the wild bursts of terror and bravery that were required.

Yet he'd been critically wounded, so he'd had to muster out. He was amazed that he'd been a soldier, but back then, he'd been very naïve.



And stupid. He much preferred carousing in town, where he never had to worry about being shot dead by an unseen enemy.

He and Nate had been injured in the same battle, with Hunter's condition being more dire. They'd sailed home to England together, and the experience had provided a bond he probably should have severed. He hadn't severed it though, so they were still cordial.

"I thought you'd never arrive," Nate said.

"I had to stop by *Ralston's* and talk to my father."

"What is your opinion about Miss Graves?"

"I'll propose."

Nate scowled. "Should I meet her first? You're prone to making rash decisions that turn into catastrophes. Maybe I should take a peek at her and save you from calamity."

"You are a bigger wastrel than I am. You are hardly the person to give me advice on my choice of bride."

"I can't permit you to shackle yourself to a harpy."

"She doesn't have vicious tendencies, but even if she did, it wouldn't matter. I'll stash her in the country at Marston Manor, and I'll visit once in awhile to get my nursery started. I really don't expect to spend much time with her."

Nate laughed. "And you think *I* am the one who's clueless about matrimony."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that wives have a devious way of controlling a fellow. You might suppose you can tuck her away out of sight, but she might not obey you. What would you do then?"

"I'd...I'd..."

Hunter cut off. He had no idea what he'd do.

His world was an array of gambling and iniquity, where he socialized with dissolute male companions. The females with whom he dabbled were doxies and it was for carnal purposes. He rarely interacted with respectable young ladies and usually mocked their fussy habits and prim attitudes.

The trollops of his acquaintance were *kept* women, so they had men to pay their rent and other expenses. They'd fallen out of a more reputable existence because they shared his low morals and his same skewed passion for debauched living.

Miss Graves was smart, stubborn, and precisely the sort who would refuse to listen. For the most part, he was carefree and easy-going. He never quarreled or bickered, and he couldn't imagine jumping into a nuptial morass filled with animosity and loathing. It was the type that had swamped his father. Twice.

As those musings swirled in his head, he was suddenly questioning his plan to proceed with Miss Graves. But as rapidly as his qualms surfaced, he shoved them away. He was vain and competitive, and he'd told his father that he'd marry her. He wouldn't admit defeat.

She would be swept along in the wake of what he'd arranged. He simply couldn't envision any other ending.

"I'm traveling to Parkhurst on Friday," he said. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Well, I certainly can, but what if I don't like her?"

"You'll like her. She's actually quite fascinating."

"Fascinating!" Nate scoffed. "Next I know, you'll be telling me she has a nice personality."

"She's very different. She's sassy and intelligent, and she's figured out what she wants out of life. She's reached out to grab it for herself."

"To me, that sounds awfully close to being a termagant who will argue constantly and insist on having her own way."

"She's a mature adult, rather than a vapid debutante, so I'll be able to carry on a conversation with her."

Nate's tone was very snide. "Yes, that's what you've always sought from your female companions: pithy conversation."

"I might be wed to her for decades, so it seems like a good attribute to me."

"But is she beautiful? Isn't that your primary requirement in a bride?"

Hunter thought about Miss Graves. With her chestnut hair and big green eyes, she was completely unique. On the two occasions he'd talked to her, all that glorious hair had been barely restrained by numerous combs, but he could vividly picture himself pulling them out, watching as those lush curls tumbled down her back.

"She's not beautiful," he said. "She's pretty; she has dimples."

He was stunned to have mentioned such a ridiculous feature, and Nate snickered derisively. "Pretty—with dimples! You've definitely

picked a winner.”

“She’s quirky too.”

“Quirky!” Nate was aghast. “In all my days, I’ve never heard a fiancée described as *quirky*. If that’s the best you can say about her, are you sure you’ve sufficiently reflected on this?”

“No, I’m not sure, but I’ll do it anyway. For my father. Because he asked it of me.”

“Neville is a scapegrace and fiend. Since when are you so eager to oblige him?”

Hunter was tired of debating the issue.

He had plenty of doubts, but he was an optimist who truly believed he could bend the universe to his will. He would charm Miss Graves, then mold her into the perfect spouse. He wouldn’t contemplate any other conclusion.

“I’m weary of discussing my betrothal,” he said. “You can’t dissuade me, so will you come to the country with me or not?”

“Oh, I’ll come. You’re about to engage yourself, and I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Then can we get on with the first interview? I need to wrap up this search and choose someone. I can’t continue to dither.”

“You know,” Nate said, “your bride might not like you to have a mistress.”

“Who would tell her about it? You? Me? I will have a life that’s separate from hers. I promised my father I’d marry and begin filling my nursery, but I never promised I’d change myself into a person I’m not.”

“A wife can work strange magic on a husband. She might alter you so significantly that you’ll be unrecognizable.”

“She won’t,” Hunter firmly stated. “Are the candidates ready? Can we start?”

“Yes, they’re ready, and I think you’ll be delighted with who I’ve found.”

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Isabella Darling listened as the front door opened down in the foyer, then she hurried away from the window and eased onto a chair. She smoothed her expression, so she’d seem calm and bored. It was the attitude Hunter liked her to exhibit, and it was her job to give him what

he wanted.

She resided in the comfortable house he owned and offered to his mistresses, but she considered it to be *her* house. He had a key, so he was free to come and go, but she lived on a jagged edge, exhaustively wondering when and if he was about to arrive. She had to greet him enthusiastically, then provide him with whatever attention was necessary.

She wasn't complaining though. She cherished the spot she occupied, and she was adept at supplying the carnal pleasures he relished. She simply wished he would notice how vital she was to his happiness and that he'd reward her accordingly by having her stay on rather than parting from her.

Why set her aside? They were so compatible that it made no sense.

For the past three hours, she'd been pacing and waiting for him. He'd claimed he'd appear by eleven, but as was his usual habit, he was late, so it was after one o'clock. She wasn't supposed to have an opinion about his tardiness, but she couldn't help but be extremely aggravated.

She was cognizant of the task that had kept him busy that evening. He'd been dallying with candidates who hoped to replace her, and she was furious that he was proceeding. When she'd initially decided to be his paramour, she'd accepted the twelve-month limit he'd imposed, then he'd hand over a gift of money and jewels and send her away.

She'd even signed a binding contract to that effect, and it spelled out the terms of what he'd furnish and what she'd receive.

Before she'd entered into the salacious relationship, she'd conferred with two of his prior mistresses, and they'd urged her to agree. They'd insisted he was kind and generous and would deliver a thrilling year of excitement and surprises.

They'd been correct. She'd had a splendid year, but it was ending in six short weeks, and she couldn't bear to be tossed over, especially with his father having become an earl.

Hunter wandered in the most elevated of circles, so she was accustomed to wandering there too, and she should be allowed to remain there with him. Not as his mistress. But as his wife. Why couldn't it happen?

They shared the same dissolute tastes, and she fit into his decadent world as no frivolous debutante ever could. She'd even be willing to

look the other way as he philandered with slatterns. She was that modern and open-minded.

He bounded up the stairs to her boudoir. Night air wafted in with him, carrying a cloud of smells that were irksome: liquor and cheap perfume. She ignored them and pushed herself to her feet, moving casually, as if she hadn't been on pins and needles for an eternity.

"Hello, darling," she said. "I'd about given up on you."

"I wasn't certain you'd still be awake, but I thought I'd take a chance."

He was a negligent scapegrace, so he often tendered promises as to where he'd be or when he'd return, then he promptly broke them. She was used to it, but as the last minutes of their connection ticked by, his antics were irritating her more and more.

She strolled over, guaranteeing he had a full and naughty view of her voluptuous anatomy. She was more beautiful than any of his previous lovers, and she liked him to remember that she was.

She was wearing new lingerie that barely covered anything that ought to be covered, and as she ambled toward him, he was definitely intrigued. She rose on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth. With her standing so close, the smell of perfume was even more obvious, but she was a professional, and her smile was solidly affixed.

"Shall I pour you a whiskey?" she asked. "Or have you already had too much?"

"You're aware of my opinion. A man can never have too much whiskey."

She sauntered to the table in the corner where she kept a liquor tray. She dawdled, letting his hot gaze roam over her backside. When she spun to face him again, he'd sat on a chair and was loosening his cravat.

She went over and finished the chore for him, and she flitted about, fussing over him and making him more comfortable.

"Is that new lingerie?" he asked. "I don't believe I've seen it before."

She was delighted that he'd noticed. "Yes, I just bought it. Do you approve?"

"Very much."

She plopped onto the chair next to him and nonchalantly inquired, "How were the interviews? Did anyone tickle your fancy?"

"I talked to three girls, but I wasn't impressed. I guess I wasn't in the mood. I'm focused on other matters."

She swallowed down a sigh of relief. His blowhard friend, Nate Carew, was arranging the interviews, and she'd been slyly trying to discover who he'd invited to audition for the post, but she hadn't had any success. If she could find out who some of the applicants were, she'd run them off, but Nate was being unusually tight-lipped.

"What's occupying you so intently?" she asked.

"I shouldn't say."

"No, no, tell me."

"It will simply upset you, and I'd rather not."

"You could never upset me. How often must I declare it?"

"It's bad enough to discuss your replacement. I always feel guilty afterward."

"I know what's coming, and I'm being a trouper about it. I'm not a starry-eyed adolescent, and you shouldn't ever feel guilty."

He smirked skeptically, then spoke the most frightening words ever. "I've decided to wed after all."

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "To the debutante your father found for you?"

"She's not a debutante, but yes. I met her, quite by accident, and I like her. My father may have done me a good turn for a change."

"But marriage, Hunter! You're a confirmed bachelor. Are you sure about this?"

He shrugged. "I'm thirty this year, and with my elevation, I can't put it off."

"I understand."

"No, you don't. You are not an enigma to me. You can't abide that I'll wed, but we've been through this. You were never destined to stay with me."

"I don't have to be reminded."

"It doesn't seem to me that you've accepted the conclusion that's about to arrive. I hope you won't be a nuisance about it."

"Gad, no! How could you imagine I would?"

He sipped his drink and studied her over the rim of the glass. Then he said, "I'm traveling to the country in a few days. To propose to her."

"Oh."

“Once I’m back, we’ll have to begin finalizing our separation.”

“I have six more weeks, don’t I? I’m not in any hurry to leave. Unless you want it to be earlier than that?”

It was a dangerous question. What if he replied with, *Yes, actually, I’d like you to go tomorrow?* Yet he wasn’t impulsive or cruel.

“It’s not so much what I want or don’t want,” he said. “I’m not keen to stagger to the end of our contract, only to have you weeping on my shoulder and begging for an extension. We’ve always been fond, and I would hate for us to wreck our relationship just as it’s winding down.”

“With you marrying,” she dared to point out, “should you proceed with picking a new mistress?”

“I probably will. I would never let a woman rule my life. Just because I have a wife, I won’t carry on any differently.”

“Yes, but your bride might learn of it, and she wouldn’t be happy. Brides have expectations, and they can be a pain in the rear. Maybe you and I should keep on as we have been. It would be less conspicuous than bringing in someone else.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Relief shot through her. He hadn’t immediately discounted her suggestion. It meant she had an opportunity to water the notion and watch it blossom.

“You’re distracted by such weighty issues,” she said, “and it’s making you irritable.”

“Am I irritable? I apologize. I hadn’t realized it.”

“You ought to relax.” She grinned wickedly. “I can help you with that problem.”

He raised a brow. “Can you?”

“I know what you need, Hunter. I always have.”

She stood and yanked off her robe, then she pulled him to his feet and led him to the bed. He followed after her like a puppet on a string.

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Hannah was walking down the lane toward Parkhurst Manor. Jackson was with her. He had a satchel flung over his shoulder, and she was lugging a heavy portmanteau that banged on her thigh with every step she took. She’d likely have bruises in the morning.

They’d ridden to the country on the mail coach and had been

delivered to the coaching inn in the village. They could have hired a carriage to convey them from London, but she constantly counted her pennies.

She was half-owner of the estate, with her father having bizarrely bequeathed it in equal shares to her and her half-sister, Rebecca, so she should have been richer than she was. She should have had money to burn, but Amelia and Winston ran it for her, and they'd destroyed the farm and any income it might have generated.

She could have demanded their exit and run the place herself, but the finances were in such disarray that she didn't feel competent to fix what they'd ruined.

Amelia had repeatedly complained to Hannah's father that she loathed Parkhurst, so in his Last Will, he'd left her a monetary bequest rather than the property. The estate had gone to his two daughters instead, but it had created a quagmire Sir Edmund couldn't have envisioned. Or perhaps he'd envisioned it, but hadn't cared about the quarrels that would erupt after he was deceased.

Winston was a spendthrift, so he'd quickly squandered Amelia's inheritance. Hannah's attorney, Mr. Thumberton, had warned her to get rid of the wily couple, but how?

Her only recourse was to expel them, but despite how often she considered it, she hadn't forged ahead. Amelia—for all her foibles and faults—had been Sir Edmund's wife. She'd been Hannah's stepmother for eighteen years, and she was Rebecca's mother.

Could Hannah kick her out? So far, the reply to that question had been a resounding *no*. Amelia and Winston, because of their hasty nuptials after Sir Edmund's death, were reviled everywhere. They had no funds of their own, so if Hannah insisted they leave, they had nowhere to go.

An added wrinkle was that Rebecca owned Parkhurst too. Hannah could command Amelia and Winston's departure, but Rebecca could reverse any order. Rebecca would never agree to evict her mother, and how could Hannah ask her to do that?

The entire situation was infuriating, and she wished Sir Edmund was still alive so she could scold him for being such an idiot. Hannah had no energy for the fight that would ensue if she tried to be shed of Amelia and Winston, so she hadn't acted, being content to let her problems



escalate.

When Rebecca was older, they would have to have a serious discussion about choices.

She and Jackson were strolling through the orchards that led up to the manor, and she refused to glance at the trees that needed trimming, the fruit that hadn't been picked. They provided blatant examples of Winston's mismanagement.

Previously, they'd had capable employees who could have prevented matters from descending into chaos, but everyone had quit who'd been the least bit proficient and trustworthy. Winston was so unlikable that employees with any talent or ability wouldn't work for him.

"Did you like growing up here?" Jackson asked.

"I suppose. Prior to Amelia arriving, it was quiet and uneventful. After she staggered in, it went downhill very fast."

"She's been at Parkhurst for...what? Eighteen years?"

"Or thereabouts."

"I won't like her, will I?"

He hadn't met Amelia or Rebecca and had only heard Hannah's tales of woe. She frowned. "I doubt you'll like her, but I shouldn't be so frank with you. It's horrid of me to gossip about her so much. You should always form your own opinions."

"I can decide whether I like someone or not. Don't you worry about that. You could never persuade me to believe a lie."

They reached the end of the trees, and the manor loomed up before them. It wasn't the most extravagant mansion in England, but it was very fine all the same. It was three stories high, constructed from grey stone mined in a nearby quarry. The windows gleamed in the afternoon sun.

Behind the house, the park stretched to the woods off in the distance. It was scenic and bucolic, but the serene beauty camouflaged the rancor in the residence.

The driveway curved up to the ornate front doors, but the spot looked deserted. There were no employees busy with chores, no swathing of grass or tending of the horses over in the meadow. If no footman emerged as they approached, she wouldn't be surprised.

It was another indication of Winton's inept bungling. He didn't know how to run the farm, and Amelia barely possessed the skills to run

the household.

"It's larger than I imagined it would be," Jackson said. "It's making me think you're much grander than I realized."

"I'm not grand. I'm just ordinary, boring Hannah Graves."

"I don't view you as ordinary, but occasionally, you are boring."

She laughed and said, "Let's head inside, shall we?"

"It won't be so bad. You're not alone this time. I'll protect you, so if anyone is awful, I'll get even."

Her jaw dropped. "Don't you dare."

He grinned, appearing impish and even a tad dangerous. "I'm cautious when I'm extracting revenge. They'll never figure out it was me."

"We're not getting *even* for anything, and you are not avenging me—despite how I'm treated. We'll simply have a quick visit. We'll learn how I can help Rebecca, then we'll return to town."

"Maybe we should bring her with us."

They would have debated the issue, but horse's hooves sounded behind them, and they spun to see who it was. When she recognized the rider, she was so confused that she felt dizzy.

Hunter Stone? Trotting down the lane? Why would he be?

The sight of him was so odd and so unexpected that she wondered if she might be hallucinating. Was she overly fatigued? Was she ill?

"Miss Graves!" he called. "Fancy meeting you here. Isn't it interesting that we've arrived at exactly the same moment?"

"Viscount Marston? Why on earth are you at Parkhurst?"

He reined in and jumped down. There was another man with him, but he didn't greet her, and Lord Marston didn't introduce him.

Suddenly, she was fuming. "Answer my question."

Her rural sojourn would be exhausting enough when she only had to deal with Amelia and Winston. She couldn't bear to have Hunter Stone stirred into the mix too.

He stepped in so they were toe to toe, and he studied her forever, his hot gaze lingering much longer than was proper or necessary. Then he yanked it away and settled it on her brother.

"Hello, Jackson," he said.

"Lord Marston."

Jackson didn't like the snooty oaf, so he didn't exhibit any sign of

deference. With very little effort, he'd made his feelings clear.

Lord Marston whipped his focus back to her and said, "You should have told me you were traveling today. We could have come in my carriage."

"Why would I have done that? You couldn't entice me sufficiently that I'd spend hours trapped in a carriage with you."

He glanced over his shoulder at his companion and said, "She's wild about me."

"She's sassy anyway," his companion retorted.

Marston flicked a thumb at the man. "This is my friend, Nate Carew. We served in the army together."

"You were in the army?" Hannah's tone was incredibly disdainful. "With you wearing one of our uniforms, I'm amazed the British empire survived."

"I was decorated for valor numerous times."

"They must have pinned the medals on the wrong soldier."

"I have the wounds to prove it. I might show them to you in the future—if you're really, really nice to me."

She snorted. "You haven't answered me. Why are you here? Please don't tell me you were following me. I would hate for you to be that deranged."

"I wasn't following you. I was invited."

"By who?"

"By your mother."

Hannah could have begun a lengthy explanation of how her mother had been dead for over two decades, how he had to be referring to her stepmother, but she didn't want to chat with him. And if he was being truthful, that Amelia had invited him, Hannah's own stay would be very short indeed.

"I wasn't aware that you knew her," Hannah said.

"I don't, but she's been corresponding with my father, and they wore me down."

"For what reason were they corresponding? You could be speaking in riddles."

As she voiced the comment, a niggle of alarm assailed her. She was at Parkhurst because Amelia had decided to engage Rebecca. In Amelia's curt note, Amelia had neglected to mention the identity of

Rebecca's potential fiancé.

It couldn't be. Could it? Had Amelia betrothed Rebecca to this insolent, ridiculous scoundrel? Was that why he was present? To propose to Rebecca?

Well, he would wed quiet, nervous Rebecca over Hannah's dead body!

"You don't seem to have guessed what's happening," he said, "and I should probably let your mother spill the beans, but I'm happy to do it for her."

She braced, as if for a hard blow. "What beans are you about to spill?"

"She's offered your hand in marriage, and I've accepted. You'll be perfect for me, and I'd like a quick wedding. How about you?"

"You are planning to marry *me*?"

"Surprise!" He laughed as if he'd just played the biggest trick ever.

"No, no, no, no, no...." She was vehemently shaking her head. "I'm not marrying you. There's been a huge mistake."

"There's no mistake." He peered over at Mr. Carew. "What about it, Nate? Has she been offered to me?"

"Yes, Miss Graves. I'm sorry you had to find out like this. I'm intimately acquainted with Hunter, so I'm sure it's a shock."

She felt as if she'd been punched, as if she should have been lying on the ground in a stunned heap.

"Amelia gave me...to...to...you?" She could barely spit out the words.

"I realize you don't like me very much right now, but I swear I'll grow on you."

Tears flooded her eyes. Over the years, Amelia had mocked Hannah, had maltreated her, had deceived and abused her. She'd committed adultery with a man she'd loved over Hannah's father, and she'd brought that man into Hannah's life and, with no shame or remorse, had tossed him in her face.

She'd wrecked Hannah's home, had made the rural spot so hostile that Hannah had run away to escape the awfulness.

After all of that...after all of the vitriol and strife...after every terrible thing Hannah had endured, Amelia had picked this cad to be her husband? Why would Amelia assume she had the authority? Why would

she expect Hannah to blithely agree? Was Amelia insane?

Well, yes. Amelia was insane.

“Would you excuse me?” she said to Jackson, not to Viscount Marston. “I have to talk to Amelia. Immediately.”

She dropped her portmanteau and raced to the house, and she could sense them watching her. Viscount Marston laughed again, as if he found her to be the most amusing woman in the world.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Amelia Webster sat at the dressing table in her bedroom suite, and she scrutinized herself in the mirror. She didn't like what she saw.

At thirty-four, her brown eyes were still clear and probing, but her brown hair was showing strands of grey, and her husband, Winston, would notice, which was never beneficial. He was blond, blue-eyed, and as handsome as he'd been when she'd been a girl and had developed a crush on him that had never waned.

He'd worked in her father's home as her brother's tutor, and she'd loved him from the moment they'd met. While his affection had dimmed over the years, hers never had. Her biggest fear was that he'd leave her for someone younger, wealthier, and more beautiful.

He occasionally tormented her over the possibility, and with her not providing him the affluence or status he'd hoped to attain by marrying her, she constantly felt that she'd failed him.

He was thin and dapper as ever, but she was short and had gained too much weight. She didn't wear it well. The seams on her gowns had been let out as far as they would go. When she and Winston stood together, they looked like a great mismatch, rather than a devoted couple.

She needed to travel to London to purchase a new wardrobe that fit her burgeoning size, but money had become a huge issue, and there simply wasn't any left, not even for the necessities.

Winston nagged relentlessly about their finances, and the conversations made her curse her deceased husband, Sir Edmund. If he'd been richer, *she* would have been richer, so she could have supported Winston in the style he demanded.

The situation made her curse Hannah too. Hannah didn't care about Parkhurst, and she could give her half to Amelia—it should have been Amelia's anyway—yet she wouldn't consider it. She'd always been selfish, and it was the main reason Amelia detested her.

Behind her, the door crashed open, and she peered over to find that Hannah had burst in without knocking. She wasn't surprised for it to be

Hannah. After all, she'd insisted Hannah attend Rebecca's betrothal. Nor was she surprised that Hannah had barged in unannounced.

Hannah had the manners of a peasant, and despite how Amelia had struggled to impart a more ladylike disposition, it had been a losing effort. Hannah was the most stubborn female in the kingdom. She didn't listen, wouldn't heed valid advice, and she never thought she was wrong.

"Hello, Hannah," she said on a sigh. "I suppose it would be a waste of breath to suggest that you enter in a less violent way. What if I'd been bathing?"

"Answer one question for me and don't lie," was her curt response.

"What is it you wish to know?"

"Did you betroth me without seeking my permission first?"

"Gad, no. I wouldn't have the nerve. I also wouldn't dump you on some poor oaf who would wind up miserable forever. You don't exactly have the temperament to be a good wife."

Hannah stomped over to where Amelia was still seated on the stool at her dressing table. Hannah leaned down and studied Amelia's eyes.

"You're so adept at deceit and evasion," she said, "it's hard to tell if you're being truthful or not."

"I didn't contract a secret betrothal for you! And I have no idea why you'd accuse me of it."

"Then please explain why Hunter Stone is downstairs this very minute and presuming he's about to wed me."

"What? I don't intend Hunter Stone for you. He's to be engaged to Rebecca. It's why I asked you to come home. She's being completely irrational about it, and you must help me convince her to proceed."

"I hate to break this news to you, Amelia, but you need to haul yourself down to the front parlor and speak to him, for it appears there has been a grievous miscommunication between you and his father."

Amelia would admit she wasn't the smartest of women, and complex topics eluded her. "What error have his father and I made?"

"Viscount Marston thinks the betrothal is with *me*! He thinks you are my mother and that you had the authority to negotiate it. He isn't aware that you are my stepmother or that you have a daughter of your own."

"Oh, no."

Amelia frowned, trying to recall her exchange of letters with Neville

Stone. Had she mentioned Rebecca by name? Or had she simply mentioned her *daughter*?

What was wrong with Neville Stone? Hannah's father, Sir Edmund, had been quite a famous fellow, and everyone knew he'd had two daughters with two different wives. Why would Neville Stone automatically assume she'd inquired about Hannah?

What a ghastly mistake! How was she to unravel it? When she'd cleverly found an aristocrat for Rebecca, she wasn't about to let Hannah have him.

Amelia never saw the larger picture, and she asked, "What should I do?"

"You should march down and set him straight."

"Yes, yes, I guess I should."

"Please deal with it immediately. I'm incredibly embarrassed, and I shouldn't have to bump into him again until this is fixed."

"I'll confer with him at once." She stood and departed, but Hannah didn't follow her. She glanced back and said, "Aren't you coming?"

"No! I'll be in my bedchamber. After the debacle is repaired, send a maid to fetch me. I'll join you then."

"Fine, fine, be that way," she grumbled.

She would have continued on, but Hannah said, "There's one other thing I must tell you first. I meant to ease you into the introduction, but Viscount Marston scuttled that plan."

Amelia braced. "What is it?"

"I've brought a guest with me. Sir Edmund's son, Jackson? I decided he should have an opportunity to visit Parkhurst."

"You brought Sir Edmund's bastard into my home?"

"It's *my* home, Amelia, not yours. You didn't want it, remember? And Father obliged you. I own it, and I graciously allow you to reside in it, but you always conveniently forget that fact."

"That is precisely the type of snotty comment I would have expected from you."

"Yes, well, I'm a bit on edge, what with wondering whether I'm about to be handed over to that despicable scoundrel, Viscount Marston. You'll have to pardon me for being out of sorts."

Amelia glared at Hannah, and she wished she had the temerity to storm over and slap her for being so insolent, but with Viscount Marston



waiting, there was no time to quarrel with her stepchild.

No, Amelia had bigger fish to fry. Rebecca was refusing to wed, but when Amelia had gone to so much trouble on Rebecca's behalf, she wouldn't tolerate any nonsense.

Amelia was terrified Viscount Marston might have stumbled on Rebecca before Amelia introduced them. If he had, catastrophe would erupt.

Rebecca always made a bad impression, and Marston believed Hannah was to be his bride. To Amelia's perpetual consternation, Hannah was everything Rebecca was not: smart, assertive, accomplished, pragmatic, mature, and very, very pretty.

Rebecca was plain, quiet, flighty, and not very bright. If Marston imagined he was getting vibrant, captivating Hannah, then was given trembling, irksome Rebecca instead, he'd never be content with the switch. He'd renege and walk away, and it would be a disaster.

Amelia was still stung because her father hadn't found *her* an aristocrat. He'd picked one for her older sister, and he'd funded an ostentatious wedding and massive dowry. When he'd had to choose a fiancé for Amelia, he'd run out of money, so she'd had to settle for Sir Edmund.

She'd never forgiven her father, and she would rectify the situation by arranging a high match for Rebecca. She'd read about Neville Stone being elevated to earl, and she'd been the quickest savvy mother who'd jumped at the chance to snag Hunter Stone.

She ought to receive a prize for being so shrewd. She'd glommed onto him before he'd even realized he should be searching for a bride, but he thought he was marrying Hannah?

Once he met Rebecca, he'd likely feel Amelia had tricked him. He might accuse her of fraud or maybe even breach of promise, and the ramifications were too horrid to contemplate. Why wasn't she ever lucky?

She rushed down the hall and the stairs, and when she arrived in the foyer, she inhaled several calming breaths, then she went to the front parlor. She did a swift, visual survey and saw two adult men and no sign of the bastard boy.

Thank goodness.

One was a blond god—tall, broad, and handsome—and the other

was short and portly, with dark hair and eyes. Since the Stone men were all blond and gorgeous, it was easy to deduce which one was Viscount Marston.

Due to Winston's financial woes, it was difficult to pay wages, so they had an enormous turnover of staff. Her servants were barely competent, but he'd been appropriately tended. He and his companion were standing over by the window, staring out at the park, and drinking an alcoholic beverage.

"Gentlemen! Welcome!" She forced a wide smile. They spun and gaped at her, and their potent masculine focus was unnerving. "I apologize for not being here to greet you. I'm Mrs. Webster."

"Hello, Mrs. Webster," they said together.

She hurried over to them. "I'm betting you're Viscount Marston!"

She reached for his hands to squeeze them as if they were fondly acquainted, and there was an awkward moment where he didn't extend his in response. They froze, then she dropped her arms and pretended she hadn't been so forward.

"Yes, I'm Marston." He gestured to his companion. "This is my friend, Mr. Nate Carew. I invited him to tag along. I hope you don't mind?"

"No, I don't mind." She motioned to a nearby sofa. "Will you sit? We should chat for a bit. There are a few things I should explain."

"I don't wish to be rude, but where is Miss Graves? She ran off when we were out in the driveway, and I'd like to get this over with. Will she be joining us?"

"She's...she's just...ah...up in her bedchamber."

"I guess you hadn't informed her about the engagement."

"Well, yes...ah...she was a tad startled."

He snorted at that. "If we are to discuss any topic, I suppose we should begin there. How are we to convince her that she should be happy to wed me?"

"I should probably mention one crucial item..."

Amelia's voice trailed off. She was certain—if she told him the truth—he would stomp out the door and not come back. She wouldn't be able to ease him into the notion of marrying Rebecca rather than Hannah.

The silence stretched out, and finally, he broke it. "Is there a

problem with the betrothal? I recognize that Miss Graves is stubborn, but I'm sure we can persuade her to climb down off her high horse."

A dozen replies flitted through her head, but before she could pick the least destructive one, Rebecca spoke from out in the foyer. "Mother, I heard we have guests. Is it my fiancé?"

Rebecca blustered in, and Amelia would have liked to claim Rebecca made a grand entrance, but she wasn't fetching, and she slouched. She was blond and blue-eyed, like every other British girl, and she'd be seventeen in a few months, but she looked as if she might be ten.

She liked to paint in the solarium in the afternoons, so she had paint specks on her hands and a smudge on her cheek. Her hair was in braids, enhancing the perception that she was very young. She hadn't removed her apron, so she appeared unkempt, untidy, and unconcerned that she was.

If Viscount Marston hadn't been watching her in such a fierce way, Amelia would have grabbed her by the ear and dragged her out, but it was too late to rectify the damage.

A parent selected her child's husband, but Rebecca was vehemently opposed to being a bride, and if Amelia didn't know that Rebecca was too dense to plot subterfuge, she'd suspect Rebecca had deliberately displayed a disheveled condition, merely to scuttle Amelia's plan.

"Who is that?" Viscount Marston asked with venom in his tone.

"It's my daughter, Miss Rebecca Graves, and it seems I should clarify a pertinent fact."

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"Talk fast, Mrs. Webster," Hunter said, "and this better be good."

The woman had had the sense to shove her insipid daughter out of the room, and the girl had dashed off like a frightened rabbit. Hunter couldn't abide trembling ninnies, and he loathed her.

"There's been a slight glitch in the marital negotiations," the idiotic woman said.

"A glitch? You contacted my father and offered Miss Graves's hand in marriage. Am I to conclude that I have been fixated on the wrong Miss Graves?"

"I'm terribly afraid you have been, and I'm so sorry. Hannah should

have been more candid in her dealings with you.”

“You’re blaming this on her?”

“Yes, she has a habit of stirring controversy. It’s entirely characteristic of her to have deceived you like this.”

“You’re not old enough to be her mother, so what is your relationship to her?”

“She’s my stepdaughter, but Rebecca is my daughter. *She* is the one I offered.”

Hunter was still sipping his whiskey, and Mrs. Webster’s comment had him so angry he could barely keep from hurling the glass against the fireplace. Nate must have realized what Hunter intended because he plucked the glass away so Hunter couldn’t smash it.

“We should go,” Nate murmured.

“No, no, no!” Mrs. Webster practically shrieked the words. “You can’t leave! You haven’t even chatted with Rebecca.”

“I’m not about to chat with her either,” Hunter fumed.

He was about to stomp out in a huff, and Mrs. Webster started babbling as rapidly as she could, as if a torrent of speech could hold him rapt.

“She’s been educated and trained to her duties, so she’s learned how to manage a large house. I will agree she’s not that pretty, but she cleans up nicely. If you would give her a chance, I’m sure you’ll eventually be charmed.”

“How old is she?” Hunter demanded. “Has she even left the nursery?”

“She’s almost seventeen, and it’s a great age for a bride. Just ask anyone!”

“I would never wed a child.”

He was furious and embarrassed, and his mind was running at a frantic pace. He hadn’t ever wanted to be a husband, but his father had convinced him to relent. He’d believed he’d been provided a female who was intriguing and worthwhile.

Hannah Graves amused and delighted him. She was filled with vigor, attitude, and sass. They were traits he’d thought he detested, but in *her*, the unusual qualities were fascinating.

With scant pondering, he’d agreed to proceed, without questioning whether his father had fully investigated the matter—as any sane parent

would have done. His father was a lazy scapegrace who scooted through the world by exerting the least amount of energy possible. Why had Hunter trusted him?

He'd listened to Neville and had followed his advice, only to discover he'd been pursuing a different girl. He could never bear to admit that he was a reckless fool, and when he returned to London, he would wring his father's neck.

"Where is Miss Graves?" he asked Mrs. Webster. "And I don't mean your vapid, plain daughter. Where is your stepdaughter?"

"She's hiding in her bedroom."

Nate butted in. "We shouldn't tarry, Hunter. It's pointless."

"We'll depart in a few minutes," Hunter said.

"I don't like the gleam in your eye," Nate told him.

"Wait for me. Miss Hannah Graves and I need to have a little talk."

He marched out to the foyer. A crowd of servants had gathered, as if it were a scene in an exciting theatrical play. Miss Grave's brother, Jackson, was standing there too, and as Hunter passed by him, he whispered, "Her bedchamber is on the second floor, to the right, at the end."

"Good man."

Hunter patted him on the shoulder and continued on, and as he stormed up the stairs, he felt like a berserker, like a Viking about to raid and pillage. He was that incensed, which was incredibly strange.

For the most part, he was easy-going and happy. He never experienced strong swings of emotion because he rarely suffered incidents or conversations where powerful sentiment was generated. After his years of fighting in the army, he tried to never lose his temper, so his surge of rage was peculiar and humorous.

Where would it lead him?

When he arrived at her door, he didn't knock. He simply grabbed the knob and flung it open so hard that it whipped around and slammed into the wall behind.

He blustered into the sitting room, and for a moment, he was confused. It was decorated in shades of very bracing pink. The drapes, rugs, paintings, furniture; everything was pink. Beyond the sitting room, the bedroom was pink too. The frilly, feminine color was completely at odds with the type of emasculating harpy he deemed her to be.

Had he entered the wrong suite? Just when he decided the answer was *yes*, she called out from further inside.

"Amelia? Is that you? What's happened? There's no reason to barge in like a bull in a china shop!"

She appeared in the doorway to the bedroom, and on seeing him—he had to look like an angry god bent on destruction—she squealed with dismay and fled in the opposite direction. He shut the door and spun the key in the lock, then he stuck it in his coat, so she couldn't escape until he'd said what he'd come to say.

He couldn't imagine what that diatribe would be, and she wouldn't heed him anyway, but he would proceed despite her recalcitrance. He was so livid that he wondered if the top of his head might blow off, but then, she'd pushed him to that sort of deranged ledge.

He wound into the suite to the dressing room at the back. There was no rear exit so she was trapped, which was a relief. If he'd had to chase her through the house, he'd have been seriously annoyed.

"You can't be in here," she claimed.

"Too late, Miss Graves. I already am."

"What do you want?"

"I *want* an explanation. I assumed we were about to betroth ourselves, only to find out that you tricked me."

"I didn't trick you!" she huffed. "Your father and my stepmother are the culprits. I am a totally innocent party."

"There's nothing innocent about you."

"If I remember correctly, you learned my name and started bothering me. If you'd stopped being so pompously arrogant for one second and had enlightened me as to the basis of your sudden fascination, I could have informed you that I was not—and never will be—your fiancée."

"Why is that precisely? I'm a rich, prominent viscount who will someday be a rich, prominent earl. You should be down on your knees and thanking me for my interest."

"Here's a tidbit I'm sure will dent that enormous ego of yours. You're a cad, and I don't like you. I've been very clear about it. I would never bind myself to an irresponsible wastrel."

"Is that right?" he sneered.

"Yes, that's right. My father was one, and in my opinion, vice and profligacy are contemptible. I would never shackle myself to a rogue

with his same bad traits.”

She was over in the corner, trying to hide behind a dresser, and he sidled over so they were toe to toe. He towered over her, and if she'd had any sense, she'd have been unnerved, but she wasn't. She gazed up at him, her expression irked and exasperated, as if he was a great trial to her. Her disregard was so irritating that he couldn't figure out how to deal with it.

Women threw themselves at his feet. They were drawn to his handsome looks and fat purse, but they were also intrigued by his wicked habits and dissolute style of living. They never viewed him as horrid.

But then, he wallowed in the worst muck of the demimonde, so it was entirely likely he'd wandered so far outside the realm of respectable people and decent behaviors that he wasn't aware of how awful he'd become.

“You are the most absurd female I've ever met,” he said.

“I'm certain that's true.”

“You have a sharp tongue and a sassy attitude that are completely inappropriate in your gender.”

“I'm delighted by your lecture,” she sarcastically stated. “I will take your words to heart and modify my conduct so it conforms with your rigorous standards.” She gestured to the door. “Get out of here. I can't abide a man who struts and preens, and I don't have the patience to put up with you.”

She didn't know him at all, so she didn't realize the effect her command would have. He never did what he was told, never acted as others were hoping. It was the consequence of his lackadaisical upbringing. He and his two brothers had had lazy servants to tend them and no parental supervision of any kind.

As a boy, he'd never had to rein in his excesses, and as an adult, he felt no need to rein them in. If someone was stupid enough to boss him, he'd grow obstinate merely to prove he couldn't be ordered about.

He stepped in so the front of his body was crushed to hers all the way down. Sparks ignited, and they were odd and riveting. Apparently, they shared one of those physical attractions that caused poets to write sonnets.

He'd heard acquaintances insist the magnetism was genuine, but he

hadn't believed it. The universe had marked them as compatible, and he supposed, if he'd ended up wed to her, they'd have had a rollicking carnal life that was rarely enjoyed by most husbands.

But he wasn't about to marry her, and he wouldn't waste time convincing himself it was a possibility. Still though, he couldn't force himself away. Magnets might have been holding him in place.

For reasons he'd never be able to clarify later on, he leaned down and kissed her. Since he didn't like her, and he didn't deem himself to be an idiot, he couldn't fathom what was driving him. He brushed his mouth to hers in an almost chaste fashion, and even though it wasn't exactly a passionate embrace, his pulse was racing, and he was overwhelmed as a green boy with his first girl.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, her tone scolding as she yanked away.

"I'm *thinking* you needed to be kissed by me in the worst way."

"Your vanity has swelled your head to such a massive size that I'm surprised you can walk through a door."

He ignored her; he always ignored women. "I want to do it again."

"You can't bluster into my bedchamber and start mauling me."

"I can't? Really?" He feigned innocence. "No one told me it wasn't allowed."

He wasn't about to debate the issue with her. He kissed her again, this time with an incredible amount of relish. For the briefest second, she was stiff as a board, then she participated with quite a bit of enthusiasm.

He pulled her even closer and jumped in with both feet. Why not? Once he rode away, he'd never see her again. He might as well take advantage while he had the chance.

He wasn't overly amorous, didn't unbutton any buttons or untie any laces, but very quickly, he was in too deep. She was dangerous to his equilibrium, and though he recognized the hazards, he didn't stop. He *couldn't* stop.

Finally, she was the one who drew away. She put a hand on his chest and eased him back. Their lips parted, and he stared down at her. Previously, they'd been glaring, but now, they were frowning, confused over what had occurred.

The interval seemed to have been sweet, important, and actually



very grand.

“What just happened?” she asked, breaking the taut silence.

“I have no idea.”

“I don’t like you, so I’m stunned that I let you do that to me. I must have lost my mind.”

“I have that effect on women.”

“Would you go?” she said. “Please?”

“I will go—since you’ve begged so prettily. Have I proved my point?”

“What point is that?”

“That you could be wild for me—if I lowered myself to bother with you.”

She smirked. “Are you ever charming and cordial? Must you always be annoying and horrid?”

The question was ridiculous, so he didn’t reply to it. He pushed away from her and said, “I will state for the record that I probably would have liked being wed to you.”

“Liar. I would have driven you mad and sent you to an early grave. You won’t inflict yourself on my sister, will you?”

He scoffed with disgust. “I don’t dabble with children.”

Their gazes locked, and the moment became very intimate. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her to reconsider. They could contract their own marriage; they didn’t have to rely on his father or her stepmother.

Why shouldn’t they? He needed to wed in a hurry, and if he didn’t proceed with her, he’d have to find someone else, and the prospect was too exhausting to contemplate.

He didn’t necessarily like her, but she’d never bore him. She would amuse, infuriate, and tantalize him constantly. What husband could claim such a thing about his wife?

“Why is this suite decorated pink?” he said, eager to change the subject. “Do you have secret feminine tendencies I haven’t noticed?”

“No. What you see with me is what you get, and the bracing color scheme wasn’t my choice. My stepmother remodeled while I was away, and she thought I’d like it.”

“You have to tell me you *don’t* like it. I can’t suppose you would.”

He’d wrenched a laugh out of her. “I loathe it. I swear.”

“Goodbye, Miss Graves.”

“Goodbye, Viscount Marston.”

“You can call me Hunter.”

“I’d rather not.”

He hovered and couldn’t depart. It seemed as if he should offer a profound final remark, but he couldn’t imagine what it might be. He’d already made a fool of himself by traveling to Parkhurst to propose to the wrong girl. Would he compound his error by voicing sentimental gibberish he didn’t mean?

He spun and left without another word. She didn’t comment either, and as he went down the stairs to locate Nate, he couldn’t decide if he was glad about it or not.

## CHAPTER SIX

Rebecca slipped into her solarium and shut the door. She went over to the chair in the corner and plopped down.

The solarium was her haven, her sanctuary, and she spent most of her time in it, painting, reading, or staring out the window and thinking about the friends she wished she had.

Her cat, Chester, strolled by and rubbed her leg, and she pulled him onto her lap.

"I did it," she told the elderly, raggedy animal, and she grinned from ear to ear. "I looked awful and I behaved badly. Viscount Marston won't agree to an engagement now. I'm sure of it."

Her cat glared at her, then leapt down, as if to tell her she was wrong, that she could never win against her mother.

Amelia had never gotten over the fact that her father hadn't wed her to an aristocrat, and she'd sworn Rebecca would have a grand match, but Rebecca didn't want to marry. Not ever. She didn't like men very much. They were big, loud, and scary. No, if she could choose her ending, she would be a spinster—like Hannah.

Rebecca had attended boarding school for three perfect years, and they'd been the best years ever. She'd loved the packed halls and the chattering girls. She'd loved the kind teachers and quiet conversations at night in the dormitory. If she could have engineered any conclusion for herself, she'd have stayed fourteen and remained at school forever.

She was sixteen, so her mother insisted it was the appropriate age to be betrothed. Rebecca had explained that she couldn't bear to leave Parkhurst and live in a strange man's home. She couldn't bear to move in with people she didn't know or have to figure out how to boss new servants.

Her mother never listened though, and she'd declared that Rebecca would blossom as a wife, but Rebecca doubted it. She was who she was: a plain, shy, modest person who was happy with her small world.

If she could make any alteration at all, she would start a school and be the headmistress. She would remodel Parkhurst and hire a slew of

young, pretty teachers to work at it. She'd fill the empty halls of the manor with merry girls who'd smile and gossip as they flitted down the stairs on their way to class.

Rebecca would watch over all of it like a benevolent caretaker.

The dream could never come to fruition though. First—even if she dared to broach the idea—her mother would have an apoplexy. And second, Parkhurst was too valuable to be wasted on such a frivolous endeavor. She only owned half of it too, so she didn't have the right to change it.

She hated owning it though, and if she'd had her druthers, she'd sign over her half to Hannah. As it was, her mother was nagging at her to give her share to Winston, so he could sell it. Winston was deeply in debt, and it was causing problems for her mother. She and Winston fought constantly, in the evenings, in her mother's bedroom suite when she imagined no one could hear them.

Her mother's badgering was intense and difficult to deflect. She blamed Rebecca for not helping Winston, but Rebecca couldn't abide him, and she would never give him anything. Most especially Parkhurst.

She was so glad Hannah had traveled to the country, and she hoped her sister would tarry for a few days. She and Hannah weren't close, and they didn't know each other very well, but Hannah was tough and strong. She'd be able to protect Rebecca from her mother's plotting. Rebecca never succeeded with Amelia on her own.

The door opened, and the Viscount's friend entered. She'd exited the front parlor so rapidly that she hadn't been introduced to him. He was short and chubby, dark and brooding. He reminded her of a villain in a romantic novel, the sort of brute who would kidnap the virtuous heroine, so the hero would have a reason to save her.

"Hello," he said. "I'm here with Hunter Stone. I'm Mr. Carew."

"I'm Miss Rebecca." There was a chair next to her, and she gestured to it. "Will you sit?"

He pondered for a moment, then shrugged. "I guess I can. What can it hurt?"

"I'd offer you refreshments, but I don't have any. Shall I ring for a servant and have a tray brought for us?"

"No, I'm fine." He peered about, assessing her plants, easels, and books. "This is a curious spot."

“It’s where I hide when the rest of the manor is too annoying.”

“Having chatted with your mother, I can certainly understand why you’d need to escape occasionally.”

It was a shocking comment, and it was horrid of him to denigrate Amelia, but Rebecca was fascinated that he had. She’d never previously had anyone disparage her mother, except for Winston, so she was stunned.

“You made quite a spectacle of yourself for Viscount Marston,” he said. “I was left with the distinct impression that you weren’t keen to be his bride.”

She shouldn’t malign Viscount Marston, but she had no confidante to whom she could confess her reservations. “No, I’m not keen.”

“Is it just Hunter who doesn’t tickle your fancy? Or are you completely opposed?”

“I don’t wish to ever wed.” The brazen announcement was like a breath of fresh air.

“Will you be a spinster like your half-sister?”

“It wouldn’t be the worst ending.”

“Tell me the truth. Is this because you’re sweet on some local boy? Is that it? Is your mother trying to yank you away from him by shackling you to Hunter?”

She laughed. “No, I have no local beau. My mother is simply determined that I marry an aristocrat.”

“But you’re not interested, and that’s a wise decision. Hunter is a cad, and he’d be an awful husband. If you were my daughter, I’d advise you to run fast in the other direction.”

“You don’t sound as if you like him very much.”

“Oh, Hunter is a grand fellow, but I have no misconceptions as to what he’s like.”

“What’s happening out in the front parlor?” she asked.

“Hunter stormed off to find your sister, so I was waiting for him, but he’s been gone for so long that I was bored. I figured I could snoop for a bit. I always enjoy wandering through these magnificent houses.”

“Why is Viscount Marston searching for Hannah?”

“Didn’t you hear? His father and your mother bungled the nuptial negotiations, and he thought Hannah was to be his fiancée rather than you.”

“That’s a terrible mistake.”

“He’s very angry, so he had a few pithy remarks to get off his chest, but I don’t know what he expects her to do about it.”

“It isn’t her fault.”

“I realize it’s not, but when he’s enraged, he can’t control himself.”

Rebecca frowned. “He’s not violent, is he? Please swear he won’t lash out at her.”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. His pride is dented, and he has a massive ego. He’ll merely shout at her, then we’ll leave. Miss Graves can handle him though. She’s no wilting violet.”

“Are you heading back to London immediately? My mother won’t like that. She’ll want Viscount Marston to dawdle so she can brag about my stellar attributes and change his mind.”

“There’s no chance of her persuading him.”

“Praise be,” she muttered, then she brightened. “I’m lucky he doesn’t like me.”

“He wasn’t excited about marrying in the first place, so you presented yourself to him in just the right way. He was aghast that you’re so young. He’s used to women who are a tad more...worldly, shall we say?”

“Are you hinting that he likes trollops?”

“Yes, and I’m relieved that you deduced my meaning without my having to provide details.” Out of the blue, he said, “You must be an heiress.”

“I am,” she breezily admitted.

She probably shouldn’t have answered, but her status wasn’t a secret. Her mother boasted about it, but Rebecca had never viewed it as much of an accomplishment. It wasn’t as if *she* had grown rich. Her father, Sir Edmund, was the one who’d accumulated a fortune.

Mr. Carew asked, “What assets would have convinced Lord Swindon to pick you for his son?”

“I have some money in a trust fund, but mostly, I own half of Parkhurst. With my sister, Hannah? It will pass to my husband—if I ever have a husband.”

“You have money and an estate? My goodness.”

“I have *half* an estate, and since I don’t plan to ever wed, it’s a huge cross to bear.”

An avaricious gleam flashed in his eye. "It will be a constant problem for you, I'm afraid. Men can be unscrupulous when there's so much wealth in the balance. You'll be deluged with proposals from scoundrels like Hunter." He paused and appeared to contemplate the situation. Then he leaned in, as if commiserating. "It's too bad there's no gentleman in your circle who could deflect all that attention."

"Someone like you for instance?" She sounded very snide.

"Yes, someone just like me."

"Is your father an earl or a duke, Mr. Carew? If not, my mother would never let you court me."

He smirked. "Your mother doesn't have to know everything, does she? We could become cordial without apprising her. There are ways around a parent who's stubborn. You don't have to sit like a bump on a log and allow her to choose a dreadful spouse who will ruin your life."

She could practically see his thoughts racing as he calculated how rich she might turn out to be. It was unusual for a poor man to stumble on an heiress, so he'd be ecstatic over the possibilities. He'd work to woo her, and his goal would be to persuade her to elope.

Amelia had never offered much advice that Rebecca deemed valuable, but over the years, she'd delivered frequent tirades about corrupt roués taking advantage of her. Rebecca had barely listened to those lectures because she couldn't have imagined when she'd ever meet one.

Now, there was one seated next to her. How bizarre!

She was humored by his attempt to ingratiate himself. Did he think, because she was young and foolish, she wouldn't recognize what was transpiring?

Well, yes, he would think exactly that.

She wanted to jump up and run out, but she hated to be rude. She simply smiled and nodded, and when he clasped hold of her hand and linked their fingers, she let him do it. She should have scolded him and pulled away, but instead, she studied him as if she were a scientist engaged in an odd experiment.

He mentioned that he would like to visit her in the future, but she shouldn't tell her mother. She had no idea how to discourage him, so she agreed it would be fine if he called on her again.

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Jackson stood outside the solarium, spying on Mr. Carew as he flirted with Rebecca. He'd only spent a few minutes with Carew, but he was a great judge of character. Hunter Stone was a cad who didn't hide who he really was, but Nate Carew was a lower type of vermin, was seedier and more deceitful.

He was the sort of fellow who might steal the silver when he was off by himself, so when he'd gotten bored in the front parlor and had wandered away, Jackson had trailed after him.

Jackson watched everyone. He couldn't help it. It was a habit he'd developed as a boy with a very debauched mother. When she'd been Sir Edmund's favorite mistress, she'd lived a grand life, but Jackson didn't remember those days. They'd occurred before he was born.

Once Sir Edmund had planted Jackson in her belly, he'd lost interest and had tossed her away. Her fortunes had plummeted after that. She'd moved from paramour to paramour, and by the end, she'd been contracted at a posh brothel. It was a humiliating fact he'd never revealed. Particularly to Hannah.

The terrible portions of his mother's story were his own private business, and he didn't condemn her for what she'd done to survive. No, he blamed his famous father who'd abandoned her to such a difficult downfall. Other people celebrated Sir Edmund's exploits, but Jackson never would.

His mother hadn't been much of a parent. She'd enjoyed her vices too much and had liked reveling with her top-lofty friends. As a result, he'd been vigilant and wary, worried over whether there would be food to eat, whether he'd be able to have a new pair of trousers after the old ones ripped at the seams, whether the rent would be paid so they wouldn't be kicked out on the street.

For most of his childhood, he'd been on his own, with no supervision and no adult to keep track of him. It meant he was shrewd, conniving, and very independent. Early on, he'd learned to fight for the necessities. He'd had to toughen up or he'd have been a victim, bullied and beaten by other boys who wallowed in his same wretched circumstances.

He'd always been concerned about the libertines his mother had



fancied, and after she'd been out all night with them, he'd anxiously wait for her to return to their small apartment. He'd feared that, some morning, she simply wouldn't return, and what would have become of him then?

Well, the answer to that question hadn't been nearly as frightening as he'd suspected. Upon her death—a grueling slog of months that had seemed to last to infinity—a neighbor had delivered him to a church orphanage. The vicar had been a stern, righteous fellow, and he'd taken Jackson to Hannah.

Things were much better now. Hannah was funny, naïve, and scatterbrained, but she was kind too, and she worked hard. He was grateful to her, and he thought he trusted her, but he hadn't decided for sure.

For the moment, he was safe. There were clothes to wear, and there was food to eat. There were chores to do when he felt like pitching in, and she even talked about sending him to university or maybe having him enlist in the navy.

It was humorous to have her planning his future, but it was nice too. It was comforting to have her fret over him, and in exchange for her generosity, he would be her fiercest champion, which was why he was following Mr. Carew.

Who could guess what mischief Carew might foment?

Inside the solarium, Carew clasped hold of Rebecca's hand, so it was time to interrupt them. It was time to meet Rebecca too. From the tales Hannah had told him about Rebecca, he figured she'd be just as flighty and naïve as Hannah, so Jackson would have to help her maneuver through her privileged life.

He'd always fended for himself, so it was marvelous to suddenly have two sisters who needed a strong brother.

He opened the door and said, "Mr. Carew? Viscount Marston is searching for you. He's ready to leave."

Jackson had no idea if that was true or not, but it was a good excuse to get rid of the wastrel. At Jackson blustering in, Carew dropped her hand and leaned away from her, providing a clear indication that he was being too fresh with the much younger girl.

Rebecca was very calm, observing Carew as if he were a curious bug that had crept in by accident. Did she realize she shouldn't

encourage him?

According to Hannah, she was sheltered and immature, browbeaten by her mother and tormented by her stepfather, but from how coolly she was staring at Carew, Jackson couldn't imagine what sort of person she'd turn out to be.

Carew glanced over at Jackson and said, "Hunter is ready to go?"

"Yes. The horses are being saddled. He sent me to tell you to meet him out in the driveway."

"How was his discussion with Miss Graves? Any explosions there?"

"None that I heard."

Jackson had loafed outside Hannah's bedroom, listening to be certain. In the beginning, they'd shouted and argued, then they'd retreated farther into the suite. There had been sufficient silence for him to suspect what was happening—and she hadn't been in any danger. He'd tiptoed away and had spied on Carew instead.

Carew hadn't moved, and Jackson said, "You should hurry. The Viscount can be impatient, and he'll be wondering why you've delayed him."

"I suppose I should depart." Carew smiled a wily smile at Jackson, then he spun to Rebecca. "It was lovely chatting, Miss Rebecca. I'll see you again soon."

"I'm looking forward to it," she claimed, but she didn't sound sincere.

Jackson was braced like a sentinel, glaring at the older man until he started to fidget. Finally, Jackson won their paltry battle of wills. Carew sighed, stood, and marched out.

Once he vanished around the corner, Rebecca blew out a heavy breath and appeared to deflate.

"Am I glad he left!" she said quite severely.

"I was thinking you might have had enough of his company. He's a scoundrel, and you shouldn't be alone with him."

"He seemed harmless."

"Trust me. He's not harmless."

She frowned. "Who are you?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

Hannah had informed the family about him. He was living with her

over her shop, so it would have been hard to keep him a secret. Amelia Webster was incensed by his existence, but he wasn't concerned about her. She was awful to Hannah, so he loathed her, but what would Rebecca's opinion be?

If Mrs. Webster had clouded Rebecca's judgment, if she was snooty or rude, he'd be so disappointed.

"I'm your half-brother, Jackson," he said.

Her jaw dropped in surprise. "You're my bastard brother? Really?"

"Ah...yes?"

"And you dared to show your face at Parkhurst?"

"Ah...yes?" he repeated, feeling a tad low and praying he could slither out before she grew truly offensive.

But suddenly, she grinned and mischief gleamed in her eyes.

"I can't believe you're here!" she said. "Is my mother out of her mind with rage over your arrival?"

"She hasn't deigned to notice me yet."

"It means she's furious, so obviously, you've discovered how to antagonize her." She patted the chair Carew had vacated. "I predict we'll be great friends. Sit yourself down and tell me everything about your life up to this very minute. Don't omit a single detail."

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"Must you go?"

"Yes, I must."

Hunter stomped by Amelia Webster, and the butler yanked the door open so he could escape.

If he'd had any patience remaining, he'd have requested his horse be saddled, then he'd have dawdled in the foyer while the task was completed. He'd have chatted with Mrs. Webster until the animal was delivered, but he detested the entire bloody family, and he intended to never see any of them again. Most especially Hannah Graves.

A peculiar event had occurred in her bedchamber. He didn't like it and couldn't explain it. He'd kissed her senseless, a mad act he couldn't fathom, and it seemed as if it had bonded them. The whole episode had been bizarre, and his anatomy was screaming at him to dash back to her side.

Which was insanity.

As luck would have it, Nate was waiting for him in the driveway, and he said, "There you are. That little fiend, Jackson, told me to meet you out here, but when I couldn't find you, I figured he'd been pulling my leg."

"Have you asked to have the horses brought 'round?"

"No. I assumed you had handled it."

Hunter decided to head to the stables and prepare their mounts himself. He didn't need servants to babysit them, but he was delayed by Amelia Webster hustling up and grabbing his arm.

"It's so late in the afternoon," she said. "You'll wind up spending the night on the road."

"It won't kill me," he replied, although the prospect was aggravating.

"We were planning on you staying with us for a few days. Our chef has been busy all week, whipping up a delicious supper to celebrate your visit. There's no reason to flit off, is there?"

"There's every reason," Hunter said. "If I tarry, you'll throw your insipid daughter at me every second. If I'm not being bombarded by you reciting lists of her attributes, you'll be boasting about the size of her dowry. I won't fan the flames of this fantasy you've concocted with my father where you imagine she would be a viable bride for me."

"I won't fan any flames," Mrs. Webster insisted. "I promise. I was just excited for us to have some company. I'd still like that very much. We don't have many guests, and the servants have been in a cleaning frenzy to get the manor ready for you. They'll be so disappointed if you leave immediately."

"Yes, that's my biggest worry: whether I disappoint the servants or not."

She ignored the taunt. "What can it hurt to oblige me for one evening? We rise early in the country. You can be up with the sun and riding down the road before it crests the horizon."

Nate jumped into the conversation. "I wouldn't mind staying. I'm not keen to be traveling after it's dark."

"Butt out, Nate," Hunter muttered.

Nate was undeterred. "Seriously, Hunter. Mrs. Webster is right. Why not oblige her? Her servants can pamper us, then we'll go in the morning." Nate smiled at Mrs. Webster and said, "May I hope you have

a bedroom for me too? May I impose on your hospitality?"

Mrs. Webster beamed, clearly viewing Nate as an ally. "It's not an imposition at all. This is a large house, and we have plenty of space."

She and Nate spun to Hunter, their gazes beseeching him to agree.

A muscle ticked in his cheek as he debated his response, but Nate deftly thwarted him.

"We'd love to spend the night," he told Mrs. Webster. "Could you have our satchels unpacked?"

"I will," she hurried to say, before Hunter could counter the request.

"I presume you dress for supper?" Nate asked her.

"Of course. Who doesn't?"

"Good. We brought clothes—just in case."

Evidently, Mrs. Webster and Nate were now chums. She gestured to the door, and they sauntered inside. At the last second, Nate peered back at Hunter and asked, "Are you coming in or not?"

His temper was on a slow boil, but eventually, he said, "Yes, I'm coming in."

He followed them into the manor, and as he was crossing the foyer, Hannah Graves spoke from up on the stairs.

"I could have sworn you left," she said. "Why are you still here?"

"I've turned up again—like a bad penny."

"I'm sure, if you continue on to town, you'll be much happier."

"You're probably correct, but for the moment, I've chosen to tarry and let you amuse me with more of your nonsense."

She hovered, looking as if she'd hurl a thousand insults, but in the end, she whirled away and fled to her room where, no doubt, she would hide until he was really and truly gone.

As he joined Nate in the front parlor, Nate murmured, "I expect this will be a very interesting evening."

"Shut up," Hunter retorted. "Just find someone to pour me a whiskey, and shut the hell up."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“I don’t blame you for not liking her. I warned Amelia that you wouldn’t.”

Hunter glared at Winston Webster. He was a short, thin man, blond-haired, blue-eyed, and probably forty or so. Some women would likely describe him as handsome, but Hunter found him to be extremely odious.

Hannah Graves was fortunate she’d moved to town to get away from him. Had Winston Webster been the driving force behind her decision to depart?

Hunter was more curious about that situation than he should have been.

With more rancor than he should have displayed, he said, “Are you claiming you have no control over your wife?”

“I have some control—as you’ll learn once you’re a husband. When a wife fixates on an issue, it’s hard to make her listen and obey.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Supper was over. Praise be.

It had been a tedious affair, attended by Hunter, Amelia and Winston Webster, Hannah and Rebecca Graves, and Nate. Hannah had wanted her brother, Jackson, to eat with them too, and Hunter had overheard a heated exchange between her and her stepmother, over whether he would be allowed to dine with the adults.

The predicament had resolved when a footman arrived to declare that Jackson hadn’t wished to eat with them.

Smart boy. Hunter would have liked to be offered the same choice.

The meal had been stilted and unpleasant, with plenty of acrimony swirling among the various Webster/Graves family members. His earlier refusal to consider Rebecca Graves as a fiancée had simply added to the awkwardness.

Rebecca hadn’t appeared to feel slighted though. She’d been the most verbose of all the people present. Hannah had been sullenly silent, while Mr. and Mrs. Webster had tried to fill the lulls in the discussion.

Nate had pitched in too, but it had been a wasted effort.

Hunter couldn't wait for morning so he could climb on his horse and escape. If Nate declined to accompany him, he'd go alone.

The ladies had left the dining room, so he and Nate were trapped with Webster while they drank their ritual glass of port. Hunter couldn't abide port though, so it was another aggravation to lay at Hannah's feet. His current misery was her fault.

"Why did you assume I wouldn't like Miss Rebecca?" he asked. He wasn't interested in Webster's explanation, but someone had to keep the conversation limping along.

"Isn't it obvious?" Webster replied. "She's too young for you. And too plain. Your penchant for beautiful women isn't a secret."

"I'm not sure if I should be flattered or alarmed."

"I told my wife that Rebecca could never entice you, but it's difficult for a mother to admit her daughter isn't pretty."

It was a horrid comment, and if Hunter had had some authority over Rebecca, he'd have pounded Webster into the ground.

Nate spoke up. "Miss Rebecca may not be fetching, but she has other attributes."

"Name one," Webster said like an ass.

"She's an heiress, and money always makes a female more attractive."

Hunter frowned at Nate. "How do you know she's an heiress?"

"Oh...ah...I just figured she must have been. Why else would your father have pursued an engagement?"

Nate couldn't hold Hunter's gaze, so he was being furtive over some topic, but Hunter didn't care what it was. He simply yearned for the dreary night to be over.

"Yes, she's an heiress," Webster said to Nate, "but not much of a one. Not with Marston's recent elevation. He can wed any girl in the world. Why not chase after a duke's daughter or a princess? He doesn't have to settle for a provincial nobody."

Hunter's blood boiled on Rebecca's behalf. "It doesn't sound as if you like your stepdaughter very much. She seems rather harmless to me. How has she earned so much of your ire?"

"It's never easy to raise another man's child," Webster said.

"Yes, I'm certain she's been a constant trial to you." Hunter's tone

was incredibly sarcastic. “Since I’m not marrying her, who will your wife offer her to next?”

“I wouldn’t dare to speculate. Amelia is determined to find an aristocrat for her. She’s regretted that she wasn’t given a nobleman herself, and she’s anxious to rectify the situation with Rebecca.”

A hint of rage flashed in Webster’s eyes, but he quickly concealed it. Was he chafing over his wife’s reverence for aristocrats?

Hunter suspected the man’s lineage would be quite low on the social ladder. He was lucky to have up-jumped into a marriage to Amelia Webster, but he was very vain, so he probably wouldn’t view his condition in that light.

Just to be spiteful, Hunter said, “What about your other stepdaughter, Hannah? What is your opinion of her?”

“She’s stubborn and willful, and she carries on however she pleases.”

“Will Mrs. Webster find a husband for *her*?” Hunter asked.

“Gad, no. If Amelia tried, I would have to put my foot down. Hannah would emasculate any oaf who agreed to have her. I’d never allow Amelia to trick some poor fellow into shackling himself.”

Hunter’s patience was exhausted. He couldn’t decide if Webster simply had no manners or if he imagined Hunter would be impressed by his lack of circumspection. Hunter wasn’t exactly discreet himself, but there were some remarks—particularly familial ones—that shouldn’t be voiced aloud.

He downed his drink, then stood. “Let’s join the ladies, shall we?”

“Yes...ah...I guess we can,” Webster said. “I wasn’t finished with my beverage.”

Hunter started out, not supplying Nate or Webster with a chance to delay him. A footman escorted him to an adjacent parlor. Amelia Webster was seated on a sofa, and Rebecca was over in the corner and ineptly plunking out a tune on the harpsichord. Hannah was nowhere to be found.

The French doors onto the verandah were open, and he marched by the two women without pausing. As he exited into the fresh night air, he inhaled several deep breaths, as if he’d been suffocating and hadn’t realized it.

The moon was up and shining over the park. There were no lamps



lit, but he could see well enough, and he was desperate to flee the manor. If he tarried where he was, he was afraid Mr. Webster would bluster out to talk.

Hunter was a very gregarious person who liked to revel in outrageous ways. He spent his time in packed venues: auctions, horse races, gambling clubs, balls, supper parties, but he was easily bored, and he couldn't bear idiots, sloths, or ingrates. He especially couldn't bear fawning sycophants or unscrupulous brutes.

Amelia Webster was stupid and dull. Rebecca was silly and uninteresting. Winston Webster was a conniver and a fraud. Hunter felt it down to his bones.

He went out into the garden and wandered down a path until he was a distance from the house. Then he halted to study it. What must it have been like to grow up in the spot? He hadn't ever met Sir Edmund, but Neville had been acquainted with him, and apparently, he'd been a gambler and wastrel with little sense or luck. Hunter was surprised he'd held onto the estate and had been able to bequeath it to his heirs.

He spun around, wondering if he'd keep walking, if he might simply head off and not come back, but he saw Hannah Graves sitting on a bench. She was hunched down in the shadows, obviously hoping he wouldn't notice her, but where she was concerned, he had a heightened perception that was working perfectly.

"Miss Graves," he said, "this is the second occasion I've stumbled on you in a dark garden. It must mean something. What could it be?"

"Don't flatter yourself into supposing there's a purpose to it."

"You were a complete snot to me at supper. You barely spoke two words."

"I rarely converse when I'm at Parkhurst, and I wasn't about to alter into a chatterbox merely because you're present."

"I don't think you like your relatives."

"And *I* don't think my relationship with them is any of your business."

It was clear she was as exasperated with them as he was. He sauntered over and plopped down next to her, and she sighed with aggravation.

"Must you bother me?" she asked. "I'm having a few quiet minutes by myself. I don't need you interrupting."

“Shouldn’t *you* be inside with your kin? This is your home after all. Aren’t you glad to be visiting them?”

She mumbled a comment he couldn’t decipher, then said, “Why are you still here? I could have sworn you were leaving.”

He shrugged. “It was late, and I wasn’t eager to ride off when evening was approaching. My friend, Nate, didn’t want to either. Mrs. Webster begged us to stay.”

“It wasn’t just so you could dawdle and annoy me beyond my limit?”

“Much as I’m sure it will devastate you to hear it, when I decided to remain, you never crossed my mind.”

The remark was a bald-faced lie. From the moment he’d met her, she’d been front and center in his mental musings. Especially since he’d kissed her up in her bedchamber. He was certain it had been an anomaly. If he tried it again, he was positive he wouldn’t be as overwhelmed as he’d been earlier.

Shouldn’t he find out?

He dipped in and kissed her, but he only managed a quick brush of his lips to hers before she shifted away.

“Would you please stop kissing me?” she said, her tone scolding.

“I couldn’t help myself.”

“You appear to be fascinated with me, which I don’t understand. Would you clarify what’s happening between us?”

“I haven’t the vaguest idea. It seems as if we’re destined to become better acquainted.”

She scoffed. “That’s not why. It’s because women drool over you, and you’re irritated that I haven’t.”

“You haven’t drooled *yet*, but you will.”

He stole another kiss, and this one lasted a little longer. She pulled away and chuckled, but with disgust. “You are the vainest oaf I’ve ever encountered. Were you always this pompously infuriating? Or have you grown more arrogant as you aged?”

“I was born arrogant. I take after my father.”

They were silent for a bit, and he could practically read the tortured thoughts rolling around in her head. He was that attuned to her every emotion. She was fuming, wishing she was somewhere else. In that, they had a lot in common.

"I don't like your family," he said.

"Oh, you are so rude."

"Should I fib about it? Should I pretend they're marvelous?"

"I'd realize you weren't serious. They're not very likeable."

"How old were you when your father married Mrs. Webster?"

"Seven."

"And how old was she?"

"Sixteen."

"That must have been...*interesting*."

She sputtered with amusement. "You are a master of understatement."

He pointed out the obvious. "You don't get along with her. You never have."

"No."

"How about your half-sister, Rebecca? Do you get along with her?"

"I don't really know her. When she was younger, I was away at boarding school. Then she went to school, and I moved to London."

"To escape?"

She paused forever, then said, "I will only admit it this once. Yes, I was desperate to escape."

"Where did you drum up the funds to pay for it?"

She gasped with offense. "Viscount Marston! My finances are none of your business either. Why must you be so maddeningly blunt?"

"If I'm curious about a situation, I ask. Would you rather I lurked in the halls and listened to the servants gossiping about you?"

She paused again, but she was brimming with the need to talk about her life. She couldn't resist. "My father bequeathed some money to me, and I used it to purchase my shop."

"How has that worked out? Are you succeeding? Or will you wind up bankrupt?"

Her shoulders slumped. "Your inquiry is so impertinent that I should ignore you, but I constantly worry about failing. I have my brother, Jackson, to support now, so my burdens are particularly heavy."

He studied her, thinking she looked tired and weary. She assumed she could manage on her own, but he doubted she would. Everyone agreed that women shouldn't involve themselves in commerce, and he supposed—before too much more time had passed—she'd be forced

back to Parkhurst.

“Would your stepmother let you move home?” he asked. “Or would she bar the gates?”

She smirked. “She can’t bar the gates. Parkhurst belongs to me. Well, to me and Rebecca. My father gifted it to us in equal shares.”

“That’s quite extraordinary, isn’t it? What about Jackson? Why didn’t he get a share?”

She leaned nearer and whispered, “He’s my father’s natural son. Father didn’t leave him anything.”

“But you’re raising him?” Hunter frowned. “How did that occur exactly?”

“A vicar from an orphanage delivered him to me a few months ago. His mother had died, and he didn’t have any other family.”

“Were you aware of his existence prior to his waltzing in?”

“No, so I’ve had some very bewildering moments recently.”

“How old is he? Fourteen or so?”

“Yes, fourteen.”

“He seems a tad...worldly to me, as if he’s seen more than a child should have.”

“You are very perceptive.”

He was glad there was no lantern shining on them. She was confiding all kinds of information she’d regret in the morning.

“You’ve confessed many secrets,” he said. “What am I to make of such candor?”

“I shall blame it on the night. It’s spurring me to spill details about myself I shouldn’t have revealed.”

“I hate to ask about your shop again, but what if it fails and you have to return to Parkhurst? Mrs. Webster wouldn’t be too thrilled to have Jackson on the premises. If she wouldn’t let you bring him with you, what would you do?”

“Amelia has no stake in the property.” She grinned, appearing impish. “She and Winston live here at my pleasure. If I want to come home, and if I want to bring my bastard half-brother too, she can’t stop me.”

It was a bold declaration that was extremely fascinating to him. Generally, he didn’t like assertive women. He didn’t like them to be over-educated or to have their own money. When a female was too

smart or too rich, it left her with personality traits that were exhausting.

He liked women who were compliant and agreeable, who were obedient to the men in their lives and grateful for the support, advice, and sensible restrictions those men provided. So why was he tantalized by her?

He was baffled by his interest, and it was madness to tarry with her on a dark bench. For some odd reason, he was suffering from a strange urge to learn more about her, to absorb every fact he could coax her into disclosing. No matter how much she imparted, he felt he should hear more.

He asked, "What will happen to your sister now that I've quashed an engagement?"

"I'm betting Amelia will snag some other poor sap."

"Would Rebecca be amenable? She doesn't seem that keen on matrimony."

"I have to have a heart-to-heart chat with her about it."

"If her mother tries to force her into a marriage, might she run away to London? Would she show up on your stoop and beg for help? You'd have two siblings needing assistance."

"Gad, don't even think it! I have burdens enough as it is."

"Why don't you just kick the Websters out? You could return to Parkhurst and manage the place yourself. It might be easier than scraping by in the city."

"They don't have anywhere to go. Should I toss them out on the road? And then what? Amelia is Rebecca's mother, and I can't convince myself to treat her badly. It's better if I stay where I am."

"When did she wed Mr. Webster?" he asked.

She gnawed on her cheek. "Could we not talk about it?"

"Tell me. I want to know."

She remained mulishly silent, and he clasped her hand and linked their fingers. Then he bent in and nuzzled her neck. She shivered and glared, then shocked him by saying, "Winston moved in the day after my father died."

"What? No!"

"He and Amelia were married a month later."

"Your vicar was willing to perform a ceremony?"

"No, he refused, so they eloped to Scotland. Winston was a tutor in

her father's house when she was growing up, and she's been sweet on him since she was a girl."

"He swooped in to claim her the minute she was a wealthy widow. May I label him the worst of fortune-hunters?"

"Yes, and her inheritance from my father was a gift of money. Winston spent it very fast, and their penury adds to the weight that's been imposed on me. They have no funds of their own, so how can I evict them? What is my duty to them? Have I a duty? I struggle with that question, and I can't persuade myself to be cruel."

"You're what? Twenty-five?"

"Yes, and I'm sure I'm obliged to watch over Amelia as my father's widow, but should Winston be included in that obligation? The situation vexes me."

As she voiced the comment, she looked young and vulnerable. It was obvious she could use a strong man by her side, and suddenly, he caught himself eager to be that man.

He wanted to step into the role of protector. He wanted to announce that she was no longer alone, that he would lift her heavy load off her shoulders and carry it on his own. He wanted to care for and defend her, to keep her safe from Winston Webster. He couldn't abide Mr. and Mrs. Webster, and he had no connection to them. He would have no problem evicting them. It wouldn't stir a single ripple in his conscience.

The impulse to intervene was so powerful that he physically bit down on the words that were trying to spill out. He was terrified, should he open his mouth, he'd utter promises he didn't mean.

She chuckled in a self-deprecating way. "I can't believe I told you all of that. I guess I've been anxious to confide in someone who would listen, and you've been my unwitting, captive audience. Have I bored you silly?"

"No, I'm glad you apprised me of what occurred. From the moment I arrived, everything felt out of balance, and now, I understand why. Please tell me you have some male guidance out there in the world. Is there anyone to give you solid advice?"

"Yes, I have male guidance. Very good male guidance in fact, so don't worry your pretty little head. My assets are held in trust and overseen by my father's lawyer. Mr. Thumberton? Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him well. He's my father's lawyer too."

It was a relief to learn Thumberton kept track of her. The renowned attorney served the best families, so Hunter wouldn't need to fret about her quite so much.

"I like to pretend that I'm in charge of my shop and my money," she said, "but I can't make any important decisions without his permission."

"Why hasn't he ordered you to rid yourself of Mr. and Mrs. Webster? If you're not here to rein them in, aren't you afraid they'll engage in mischief you wouldn't like?"

"I'm constantly nervous about it, and he has suggested I rid myself of them, but I'm too nice."

"Yes, you are." *And too gullible*, he mused to himself.

Winston Webster was the type of cretin who would rob her blind, and again, it was on the tip of his tongue to extend his assistance, but there was only one route to having any influence or control over her, and that was to become her husband, which didn't interest her in the slightest.

"Will you return to town in the morning?" she asked.

"That's my plan."

"What is your life like there? Is it all gambling, parties, and loose women?"

"Yes, you've described it exactly."

"Don't you ever wish you behaved better?"

"No, but I'm not the total wretch you assume me to be."

"You're not? Aren't you celebrated for your vices? Don't you have a mistress?"

"We're not discussing her."

"Why not? You're sufficiently dissolute to have one, but you can't talk about it?"

"Correct, and if you'd ever met my father, you'd comprehend why I have so many failings. He's much worse than me. While growing up, I had no authority figure to tamp down my reckless impulses. My brothers and I were raised by servants who weren't concerned about us, so we were wild and incorrigible."

"If that statement is supposed to make me feel sorry for you, it hasn't."

"I tried to mend my ways by joining the army for half of a decade. I wasn't lying when I told you that. Has it impressed you?"

"I simply can't picture you in a uniform. Were you good at soldiering?"

"Good enough."

"Why did you retire?"

"I was wounded, remember? I almost died too. Does *that* impress you?"

"Maybe. Where were you stationed?"

"In the Americas. A band of natives snuck up and attacked our camp."

"Did you fight valiantly on behalf of the Crown?"

"No. I didn't have time to be brave. I was cut down by an arrow shot to the chest."

"A shot to the chest!" She looked horrified, and it provided him with a modicum of satisfaction.

"It happened so fast that I didn't have a chance to defend myself, and I really was close to death from my injury. After that, I decided I shouldn't pursue employment that could result in such mortal peril, so I quit and came home."

"Perhaps I am a tad impressed."

They shared a fond smile, one that was disconcerting. He found himself drowning in her striking green eyes, and he was on the verge of voicing personal remarks that would be completely inappropriate. Thankfully, she prevented him from making a fool of himself.

"Do you like being a viscount?" she asked.

"Who wouldn't? I inherited a ton of property and money. Plus, there are women—reputable women for a change—around every corner who are falling at my feet. So far, there's been no downside. Not that I've noticed anyway."

"What is your estate called? Marston?"

"Yes, and there's a grand house there too: Marston Manor."

"Would you consider fleeing the city and residing there instead?"

He scowled. "Why would I?"

"You could give up your vices and doxies. You might be able to wash away some of your sins with moral conduct."

"I would never give them up. I love my wicked habits, and a tedious existence in the country holds no appeal whatsoever."

"Who is at Marston Manor to watch over it for you?"



“The servants—but they’re competent.”

“Have you been there frequently enough to be sure?” She snorted with derision. “I just realized we both have properties we don’t want. Are we lucky or unlucky?”

“You don’t want Parkhurst?”

“I *want* it. I merely wish things were different.”

“If you wed, would it pass to your husband?”

“Yes, and if Rebecca weds, her half will pass to *her* husband, so I’ll likely end up owning it with a stranger I can’t abide. The conundrum leaves me quite breathless.”

“You could have wound up owning it with me. We’d have been bound for the rest of our lives.”

“I shudder to imagine it.”

He laughed. “Will you miss me when I return to town?”

“No.”

“Liar. Women always miss me. Admit it. You like me more than you expected you would.”

“I won’t admit it. Your ego is already too inflated.”

“Now that I’ve learned where your shop is located, I may develop an interest in reading. I may stop by constantly.”

“You? Read books? The idea is too preposterous to fathom.”

At the comment, she merrily chortled, and he liked how her eyes sparkled, how she was so genuine in her views and opinions. He was becoming ensnared by her. Fate was wrapping fetters around his ankles, locking him in, so he couldn’t escape her relentless pull.

She was a damsel in distress, and a more ordinary man might have been eager to rescue her, but he was no knight in shining armor. Still though, he suspected, if he wasn’t careful, he’d start spewing nonsense, so he leaned down and kissed her again. He enjoyed kissing her, and it kept him from having to talk, where he might have dug a deeper hole for himself.

He continued for as long as she allowed him to, but it wasn’t very long at all. Before matters could get moving, she eased him away.

“This flirtation is baffling to me,” she said.

“It’s not a flirtation,” he claimed. “I don’t even like you, so I can’t figure out what’s driving me.”

“You don’t *like* me?” She batted her lashes in a teasing way. “You

certainly know how to make a girl feel special.”

“It’s one of my most stellar traits.”

For the briefest instant, it crossed his mind that he should invite her to be his next mistress. Nate had been arranging interviews, but Hunter hadn’t met anybody intriguing. She’d wedged herself into his life, and he couldn’t ignore the perception that he wasn’t finished with her.

Should he tender the indecent proposal?

The thought bubbled to the surface as a serious suggestion, and he nearly blanched with dismay. What was wrong with him?

She was a respectable gentlewoman, a shop owner, a landowner, an heiress. He was so used to wallowing with strumpets that he’d forgotten there were females like her in the world.

“I should go back inside,” she said.

“No, you shouldn’t. You should tarry out here with me so we can keep misbehaving.”

“I can’t. I’m stunned to confess it, but for the past few minutes, you’ve seemed enormously appealing. I’m liking you more and more.”

“What a ridiculous remark. Why shouldn’t you like me?”

“If I begin to *like* you, I’ll spend all my time staring out the front window of my shop, hoping you’re about to arrive, but you’re not a man any woman should count on.”

“I might surprise you.”

“I doubt that very much.”

It dawned on him that he was still holding her hand, their fingers still linked, as if they were adolescent sweethearts. She slid away and stood, and though he grabbed for her, she stepped off too quickly and was out of reach.

“What are your plans for the remainder of the evening?” he asked her. “Will you loaf with your relatives and listen to your sister play the harpsichord?”

“I’ve heard my sister play the harpsichord. It’s not a concert I’d like to have repeated.”

“Do you play?”

“No, not a note.”

“If I remember correctly, your mother died when you were a baby. Was there anyone to train you to the frivolous activities at which young ladies are supposed to excel? Do you sing? Do you paint? Do you knit?

Are you proficient at any feminine task?"

"No, I am completely inept at every endeavor required of a female. It's why I had to stagger to London and open a commercial venture."

He snickered with amusement. "You go out of your way to be different."

"Why would I want to be exactly the same as every other girl?"

"Why indeed?" he asked.

They shared a charged look, where—should either of them speak—they might discuss dangerous topics, but she saved them by whipping away and strolling off.

"Goodnight, Miss Graves," he said.

"Goodnight, Viscount Marston." She didn't halt.

"I wish you'd call me Hunter."

"I'd rather not."

"You're a hard woman, and I'm calling you Hannah."

That got her attention. She frowned over her shoulder. "I don't give you permission."

He smiled a slow smile that promised delicious pleasure in the future. "Am I likely to care whether I have your permission or not?"

She scoffed. "No, and it simply proves my point."

"Were you trying to make one?"

"Yes, but I'm not about to tell you what it was. Instead, I'll say that I'm perplexed as to why you delayed your departure from Parkhurst. What time will you leave in the morning?"

"I hope to be on the road by seven or so."

"Will you forgive me if I don't come down to see you off?"

"No. I shall expect you to be standing in the driveway. I demand that you weep and wail and proclaim that our parting will devastate you forever."

She smiled too. "I might miss you, Viscount Marston. To my great astonishment, I just might miss you quite a lot."

"I told you I'd grow on you. It's shocking, I know. I'm too charming for my own good."

"Yes, you are. How bizarre."

She kept on, and he let her go. He was on the verge of behaving foolishly again, which he never liked to do.

He'd traveled to Parkhurst to propose marriage, and he'd slither to

London without a fiancée, so his father would start seeking offers from other parents. The prospect was exhausting.

Maybe he wouldn't return to town immediately. Maybe he'd hide at Parkhurst for a few days and allow Hannah Graves to entertain him.

There were worse endings.

At the notion of dawdling, he grinned with satisfaction. Yes, Hannah Graves was extremely entertaining. Why not have her divert him with her silly attitudes and quirks?

Why not?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“What have you to say for yourself?”

“What would you like me to say?”

Winston glared at Rebecca, trying to appear stern, but he was never concerned about how she behaved. If he was ever motivated to put his foot down, it only occurred after sufficient nagging from Amelia.

“You should be engaged to Viscount Marston by now,” Winston said, “but you’re not.”

“Oh, that.” Rebecca waved a vague hand, as if her scuttled betrothal was irrelevant. “I told Mother he wouldn’t like me, but she didn’t listen.”

“You’re blaming this fiasco on your mother?”

“I’m not sure why she thought the Viscount would be interested in me. What attributes might I have displayed that would have enticed him?”

He agreed with her. Amelia had been deranged to suppose she could have captured Marston’s notice. It had been a doomed project from the start, but he wouldn’t admit it to Rebecca. Amelia had demanded he scold her for being disobedient, but with Winston not really caring how Rebecca acted, it was hard to exhibit much aggravation.

They were in the library, with Winston seated at the massive oak desk, and Rebecca huddled in the chair across from him. Supper was over, the long, slow evening stretching ahead. Mr. Carew and Amelia were chatting in the front parlor. Viscount Marston had stomped out into the garden, and Hannah was nowhere to be found, which was always a relief.

Her loathing for Winston was well-documented, and the feeling was mutual. He couldn’t abide the little snot.

“What is your plan?” he asked Rebecca.

“About what?”

“Your mother insists you work your way back into the Viscount’s good graces. She’s determined you change his mind.”

Rebecca flashed a pitying look, one that indicated Winston was a

fool. She was lucky he didn't march around the desk and slap her. He never had, but there was a first time for everything.

Perhaps he should be more physically aggressive with Hannah too. If he'd been more forceful over the years, she wouldn't be such a vicious shrew. She might think twice before she sassed him.

"Father Winston"—Rebecca sounded particularly woeful—"it's pointless to imagine I could charm Viscount Marston. How would I?"

Winston had moved into Parkhurst when Rebecca was nine, and Amelia had been anxious for Rebecca to accept him as her husband. Amelia had settled on the moniker of *Father Winston* for Rebecca to use, but whenever he heard it, he cringed.

Especially with Rebecca being older. These days, when she called him Father Winston, there was a hint of disdain buried in her words, and it fueled his rage to a dangerous degree.

"Your mother expects you to make an attempt with Marston," he said. "If you ruin this chance, we will have to impose a penalty."

"What kind of penalty?"

"If you can't persuade him to propose, then there is no reason for you to hold onto your ownership of Parkhurst. The only value it presents to you is as a portion of your dowry, but if you don't wed, where is the benefit? You will sign it over to me—as the price for your misconduct."

"What misconduct have I committed?" she asked.

"You intentionally guaranteed the Viscount wouldn't like you."

"I did not!" she huffed.

"By your immature actions, you have wasted your mother's efforts and squandered the sole opportunity you'll have to be a bride. Gossip will spread in London that Marston declined the engagement because there's something wrong with you."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do, and I won't tolerate your nonsense. Your mother and I need Parkhurst, and it should have been ours when your father died. He never should have bequeathed it to you when you are so unprepared to own it."

"I'm a good owner!" she ridiculously claimed.

He scoffed with derision. "You are not, and I shall take it away from you before it's completely run into the ground."

"Hannah wouldn't want me to give you my share of Parkhurst."

“It’s none of Hannah’s business. You are your mother’s daughter and my stepdaughter. You’ve been deliberately recalcitrant, merely to injure us, so we will wash our hands of you. Why would we continue to provide shelter to you when you are simply a drain on our finances?”

“I’m not a drain. How can I be when the estate is half mine?”

“*I* am the one who manages it. *I* am the one who pays the bills. What, precisely, is it that you do? You paint, daydream, and wander the halls. While the property is falling apart, you live in a fantasy world, while assuming I’ll support you as if you were still ten. I don’t have to.”

She frowned, as if he’d just posed a difficult puzzle she couldn’t unravel. “I don’t think that’s right.”

“Would you like to fight me over Parkhurst? Why don’t you try? I’d love to see who would win any skirmish.”

She might have burst into tears, but they were saved by a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” Winston barked.

The bastard boy, Jackson, poked his nose in. “May I borrow Miss Rebecca for a minute. Mrs. Webster sent me to fetch her.”

Winston nearly told him to sod off, but he’d terrified Rebecca enough for one evening. He’d let her stew and worry, then he’d harangue at her again about Parkhurst. Eventually, he’d wear her down, so she supplied exactly what he required. He was a master at manipulating both her and her mother.

“Yes, you can take her away,” Winston said to the boy, then he murmured to her, “Don’t forget: If you can’t convince Marston to have you, then you will have to relinquish Parkhurst to me once he leaves.”

“I won’t forget.”

She stood and departed, and he eased back in his chair, though he was momentarily disturbed by how the boy glared virulently in his direction.

Winston ignored him, being content to gloat over the fact that Marston would never marry Rebecca, so Parkhurst was about to be Winston’s.

Amelia never should have included it in Rebecca’s dowry anyway. He’d ordered her not to, but she’d proceeded secretly, so she’d have to be punished for deceiving him.

He’d been harassing Rebecca about the property for weeks. Why

shouldn't it be his? She didn't *need* Parkhurst, but he definitely did.

She'd sign it over or he swore he'd lock her in an asylum, then seize it in the courts as her guardian. He was that determined to wrest it from her, and the conclusion would crash into her like a runaway carriage. She'd never see it coming.

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"Have you spoken to her?"

"Yes, but it was a waste of breath. She was as intractable as ever."

Amelia sighed with disappointment. She'd asked Winston to talk to Rebecca, hoping a severe lecture would force her to be more compliant, but from the morning Amelia had mentioned finding her a husband, she'd been sly and disrespectful.

They were in Amelia's bedroom suite. She was seated at her dressing table, and she'd been brushing her hair and getting ready for bed when Winston had blustered in.

"Were you able to corral Marston into socializing with her?" Winston inquired.

"No. He barely glanced at either of us."

"I warned you that it was stupid to contact his father about a betrothal."

"Yes, yes, you've only scolded me a thousand times."

"Then why don't you listen?"

He loomed up behind her and laid his palms on her shoulders, and he squeezed tightly enough that it hurt. She shook him off and spun to face him. He wasn't that tall, but he was standing, and she was sitting, so he towered over her.

"Rebecca is a good catch!" she insisted, and he scoffed.

"That might be true in your deluded mind, but not in anyone else's. We are taking Parkhurst out of her dowry. You are not to offer it in the future."

"But...but...if I remove the estate, how will she tempt a candidate? How will I snag an aristocrat for her without it being included?"

"You don't want to snag an aristocrat for *her*. You're assuaging your own vanity. Rebecca doesn't care one way or the other. You could probably betroth her to a dog, and she wouldn't notice."

"Her father gave Parkhurst to her! She can buy herself a very high



husband with it.”

Winston leaned down, so they were nose to nose. “She’s agreed to sign her share over to me.”

“You should have discussed it with me first.”

“Why would I discuss it with you? You have been insane about the entire engagement, and I *need* the money. How often must I explain it to you?”

“She’s my only child, and I have to do what I think is best for her.”

“What about what is best for me? I have a month to repay my loan. If I don’t, you’re aware of what will happen to me. Will you let me be killed by my creditors? Is Rebecca’s portion of this blasted farm worth more than my life?”

Winston could be melodramatic, and he had a temper, which she wouldn’t indulge. “Your creditors won’t kill you. They’re bluffing.”

“Can you swear they are?”

He was awful with money. As her bequest from Sir Edmund had dwindled, he’d begun looking into various mining and import schemes to rebuild their emptied nest egg.

Over the past year, he’d joined a men’s club in town where he frequently heard about new ventures that would provide a large return on any capital. He’d refused to clarify any details, claiming she wouldn’t grasp the intricacies of commerce, but they’d sounded rather shady to her.

He’d had no funds to invest, but there had been eager men who’d stepped forward with loans, as well as with vows that the projects were incredibly safe. In the end, he’d lost every penny he’d borrowed. And now, the men who’d forked over a small fortune to him were demanding what was owed—with substantial interest accruing.

A group of ruffians had visited them and had ordered him to comply in thirty days, and he was growing frantic. She was certain he was exaggerating the danger. This was England. Villains were not allowed to commit murder over a debt.

“If Rebecca wed an aristocrat,” she said, “no fiend would dare to threaten you. A lofty marriage, into a prominent family, would supply some protection. Have you thought about that?”

“Bugger your aristocrats! Stop harping about them!”

She’d exhausted his patience, and he whipped away and slammed

out of the room.

She sat forever, drained over how she'd arrived at such a despicable spot. As a girl, from the minute he'd moved into her father's house to teach her brother, she'd been fiercely smitten. She'd been very young though, and in hindsight, she suspected she might have succumbed to a very wily, craftily planned seduction.

There had been no possibility of her marrying him. He'd been too far beneath her, and she'd been given to a much older, widowed, Sir Edmund, instead. Her love for Winston had never dimmed though, and it had sustained her for an eternity, with her steeped in poignant yearning for how they could eventually be together.

It had taken a decade for Sir Edmund to pass away, then she'd rushed into the marriage to Winston that she'd always wanted. Her father and brother had been deceased by then, the title handed over to a distant cousin who didn't care how she carried on. She'd latched onto Winston immediately, but...

The reality wasn't anything like the dream had been. He was difficult, greedy, and unhappy, and he blamed her for every mistake he made. Most especially, he accused her of tricking him. Sir Edmund hadn't been nearly as wealthy as they'd believed, so he hadn't ended up with the grand life she'd promised.

She hadn't inherited Parkhurst either, even though she'd expected she would. She hadn't understood what Sir Edmund had arranged until his Last Will was read, and she'd been too nervous to inform Winston of the situation. She'd wed him—had trapped him—before she'd confessed the truth, and he'd never forgiven her for her duplicity.

He'd been plotting to get hold of the property ever since, and with his debts mounting, he was sure he could steal it from Rebecca.

Would Amelia prevent him? How could she? If she tried, it would be one more nail in the coffin of his love for her. Each year, it waned a bit more, and she was afraid it would soon blink out completely. What would she do then? If she didn't have Winston, what would she have?

She stared at the door, wondering if she shouldn't chase after him and apologize for having such an ungrateful daughter. But just that moment, she didn't have the energy for groveling. She blew out the lamp, then staggered over and climbed into bed, feeling greatly soothed by the dark night.

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“You look very fetching.”

Nate smiled at Rebecca. She was plain, but rich, so he wasn’t put off by her ordinary features. She was quiet too, which was definitely a benefit. In London, he was surrounded by doxies who were bold and brash and who blathered on constantly. In his view, women didn’t need to be spouting off every second.

“Thank you for the compliment,” she said. “I know you don’t mean it, but it’s sweet that you offered one.”

“I do mean it!” he claimed. “Why would I lie?”

“You’ve discovered I’m an heiress, and suddenly, you’re dancing attendance on me. I can’t help but be suspicious.”

His cheeks heated, and he hoped she didn’t notice. “It’s nothing like that. I’m simply a friendly person.” He gestured to the harpsichord. “Would you play a song for me? I was drinking port with your stepfather, so I missed most of your performance.”

“I shouldn’t inflict my pathetic talent on your poor ears.”

“I bet you sounded marvelous.” He beamed at her, struggling to appear amiable rather than lecherous.

“Thank you again,” she said, “but I’m aware of my short-comings. Besides, my parents have already gone up to bed. If I start banging on the keys, it might disturb them.”

They were still in the front parlor, with him seated on a sofa, and her seated on a chair across. Initially, *she* had been on the sofa, and he’d slyly snuggled down next to her, but she’d promptly jumped over to the chair.

He’d tarried after supper, trying to enjoy a normal evening of normal conversation, but normality with the Websters had been impossible. Hunter had vanished into the garden, and when he’d returned, he’d headed straight to bed. Hannah Graves had come in after him, and she’d headed up too. Nate had worked at chatting with Mr. and Mrs. Webster, but they’d been quarreling, so the entire ordeal had been awkward.

They had finally departed too, and a spark of excitement had flared as Nate assumed he’d have Rebecca all to himself, but he’d never been lucky.

A pair of footmen were hovering over by the hearth and furtively

watching him. The bastard brother, Jackson, kept flitting in and out too, providing the distinct impression that he was spying on Nate.

Nate was a renowned scapegrace who'd engaged in his share of sexual misadventures. There were always girls who sent the wrong signal, who insisted afterward that they hadn't been interested, but how was a fellow supposed to guess?

When he'd been younger and stupider, he'd landed himself in several embarrassing incidents where his father had paid damages to angry parents in order to rectify Nate's carnal blunders. Those conclusions were a closely guarded secret, particularly from Hunter who didn't like to see women mistreated.

"It's stuffy in here," he said to her. "Would you like to walk with me in the garden? The fresh air would be beneficial."

"It wouldn't be appropriate for us to walk so late."

"Shall we play cards then? Everyone else has called it a night, but I'm feeling annoyingly perky. How about you?"

"I don't like to play cards. I think I'll probably head up to bed too."

"But it's so early."

"I'm afraid it's our country schedule. We sleep early and rise early." She motioned to the two footmen. "They have to start their chores at dawn. I'm sure they're exhausted, and we shouldn't force them to dawdle."

Of all the worries on Nate's plate, the fatigue level of the servants was far down on the list.

"We're leaving in the morning," he said, panicked that he hadn't made any progress with her.

"I'm sorry we weren't able to furnish more socializing, but we don't have much company."

"Why don't you have much company?" he asked. "Parkhurst is such a beautiful property. I'd imagine you entertaining constantly. Is there a problem with your neighbors?"

She frowned, as if he'd crossed a line he shouldn't have crossed, then she stood and said, "Goodnight, Mr. Carew."

He leaned nearer and murmured, "Would you call me Nate?"

"I couldn't. I don't believe my mother would like it."

She strolled away, and he sat on the sofa, listening as her footsteps faded. After it was silent again, he held out his whiskey glass to one of

the footmen.

“Fill me up, would you? Then you can take to your bed. I’ll be going up shortly, so you don’t have to glower at me like a grouchy nanny.”

“We don’t mind waiting with you,” he said as he poured liquor to the rim. It was nice to see the dolt wouldn’t be stingy.

“I’ve excused you,” Nate told him, “and if you’re ever scolded for abandoning me, you can say I chased you away.”

“Will you remember to blow out the lamp?”

“Yes. Go! Go!”

The pair whispered a quick debate, then one of them yawned, which settled it. They slunk off too.

He should have followed them, but he hadn’t been lying to Miss Rebecca when he’d said he was feeling perky. His thoughts were racing with schemes and how he could bring them to fruition.

His father had been a gentleman farmer who’d loved to hunt, dally with loose women, and gambol in town. He’d lived extravagantly and had died penniless. The family’s estate had been seized by creditors.

Nate had had nothing to inherit, but he was possessed of his father’s same expensive habits. He reveled like a wealthy man, so he’d borrowed money everywhere, and his recklessness was becoming a dicey issue.

He wasn’t a nobleman who could spend without consequence. He couldn’t ignore merchants and fail to pay—as pricks like Hunter and his father could do. He was receiving demand letters from tradesmen, and legal action had been commenced to collect numerous debts. He was three months behind on the rent, and even his tailor had refused to accept any new orders unless Nate squared some arrears.

*Miss Rebecca is an heiress...an heiress...an heiress...*

The word *heiress* rang in his head. She’d been dropped into his life—as if by magic. Hunter had had a chance to snatch her up, but he hadn’t been interested.

Well, Nate was interested. If he married the boring, insipid girl, his fiscal difficulties would be wiped away. Why shouldn’t he try it?

Her mother wouldn’t like it, but Nate wasn’t concerned about her. He had a dormant conscience and no scruples. He wouldn’t blink an eye over convincing Rebecca to elope. He was a smooth-talker, and he simply required some time to ease her into the idea of how romantic it

would be to run away together.

Hunter wanted to ride off in the morning, but Nate had to persuade him that they should tarry for a few days. Nate needed the opportunity to ingratiate himself so she'd begin to trust him.

And if she couldn't be convinced?

She wasn't the first female who'd told him *no*. If she couldn't be cajoled through gentle methods, he was happy to use rougher ones. She would be his bride—by fair means or foul. Her money would pay off his debts, and he'd be a landowner again. His legal troubles would vanish, and his social standing would be restored.

Yes, yes, yes. Rebecca Graves was the answer to his prayers. She just didn't know it yet. She'd be lucky to have him as her husband. Even if she didn't feel lucky in the end, she'd be his anyway, and *he* would be delighted to have rendered the conclusion that was so desperately necessary.

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Jackson hovered in the shadows, watching Nate Carew finish his liquor.

Once he'd swallowed the last gulp, he lit a candle and went to the stairs. He left the lamp burning, even though he'd promised the footmen he'd blow it out. Jackson did it for him, then he tiptoed after him to be sure he proceeded to his bedchamber without any detours.

He wandered down the halls, and he was drunker than he'd let on, and it was another strike against his character. Jackson was a young man, but he'd observed too many of his mother's dissolute companions when they were inebriated, and he couldn't understand why anyone would like being so sloppy or out of control.

Carew reached his room without incident, and Jackson dawdled until he spun the key in the lock, then he snuck away and descended to the lower parlors.

The house was quiet, everyone asleep but him, but then, he suffered from terrible insomnia. It was a condition that had developed when his mother had still been alive. She'd frequently disappeared for days—and nights—at a time, and he'd paced in the dark, wondering if she'd ever return.

Many of his earliest memories were of those exhausting, scary

episodes.

He'd been given a bed in the attic that he was sharing with a cordial footman. The housekeeper hadn't been able to figure out where to put him, and when Hannah had been apprised of the decision, she'd been aghast. She'd planned to demand he have a suite of his own, claiming he deserved it as Sir Edmund's only son, but he didn't want a fancy room.

He was content with less conspicuous accommodations. It allowed him to come and go without people noticing. It was how he liked to carry on, and he learned many important details that way.

It would be a very long night, and he suspected Winston Webster had many secrets tucked away in private spots. He went to the man's library and started to snoop through the drawers in his desk.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Could I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

Hannah smiled at Rebecca. They’d gone to church in the village, and they were walking home. The vicar had droned on during his sermon, so the service had been extra long, then there had been a breakfast social on the lawn afterward. She’d had a chance to chat with neighbors she hadn’t seen in ages, so it was almost noon, and they were finally headed back to Parkhurst.

It was just the two of them, which Hannah liked very much. No one from the manor had attended with them, especially not Hunter Stone who’d previously bragged about being a heathen. Besides, he was leaving for London and would have already departed. She suffered a twinge of regret about it, but it was only a twinge.

He was an intriguing distraction, and she had many familial matters to deal with. She didn’t need him diverting her from her problems.

“I talked to Jackson about this,” Rebecca said, “and he insisted I tell you right away.”

“Have you become friendly with him? I’m so glad to hear it. I like having a brother. How about you?”

“Well, I didn’t suppose I would like it—or him. Initially, when you informed Mother about him a few months ago, she flooded the house with awful comments, so I assumed *he* would be awful, but I like him very much.”

“Good. He had a grim upbringing, and it shaped him in rough ways, so he doesn’t always behave as you or I might expect. We have to remember that about him—and make allowances.”

“Might we have other half-siblings out there in the world?”

“I’ve wondered about it,” Hannah admitted. “Father wasn’t the most moral man, so it’s possible.”

“It wouldn’t be the worst thing to have more siblings, would it?”

“I guess not, but then, it depends on what type of people might arrive in the future. Jackson is smart, loyal, and kind. We were lucky



with him.”

“Yes, we were.”

“What was it he told you to ask me?”

She and Rebecca had been strolling arm in arm, and Rebecca stopped and pulled Hannah around to face her. Without preamble, she said, “Should I sign over my share of Parkhurst to Winston?”

“No! Absolutely not. Why would you even consider it?”

“He claims I deliberately scuttled my introduction to Viscount Marston, so he wouldn’t marry me, and I have to give Parkhurst to Winston as punishment.”

The remark, and the quagmire it presented, left Hannah queasy with dismay.

She and Rebecca didn’t know each other all that well. Hannah was nine years older, and she’d spent most of her childhood at boarding school. She rarely saw Rebecca, and it was obvious they didn’t have much in common. Rebecca daydreamed and wandered the halls, acting in such a silly manner that Hannah often found herself irked to her limit.

Life was hard and choices difficult. If a woman failed to utilize her intellect, she simply ended up being bossed and abused by everyone.

Hannah was also constantly disturbed by the rumor that Rebecca wasn’t Sir Edmund’s daughter. To her great shame, she always caught herself furtively studying Rebecca, looking for Winston’s features.

Had Rebecca ever heard the rumor? Was she aware of the dreadful gossip? If so, she’d never provided the slightest hint.

“Is Winston correct?” Hannah asked. “Did you deliberately ruin your introduction to the Viscount?”

Rebecca stared at Hannah forever, then she grinned. “Maybe.”

“You scamp! Why don’t you like him? He’s rich and handsome. Every girl in the kingdom would like to snag him.”

“Would you deem me terribly peculiar if I tell you I wouldn’t like to get married? Not to him or anyone.”

“No, I wouldn’t think you’re peculiar. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m twenty-five and I’m not married either.”

“Will you ever walk down the aisle?”

“I can’t fathom it.”

“I’ve begged Mother not to find me a husband, but she won’t listen. She insists she can force me into it.”

“She can’t force you, but she can pressure you relentlessly until you give in.”

“Winston says I’m disobedient and disrespectful. He says they’ve supported me, so I *owe* them for staying here.” Rebecca paused and frowned. “He shouldn’t threaten me, should he? It doesn’t seem proper for him to treat me like that.”

Hannah didn’t like to picture herself as having a bad temper, but the reality was that she had a *very* bad temper. Yet she never thought potent displays of emotion were beneficial. In that, she was too British.

Her fury bubbled up to a frightening height. But wasn’t that a typical occurrence whenever she visited Parkhurst?

“First off,” she said, “Parkhurst belongs to you and me. Not to Winston! We have been permitting *him* to reside here. You don’t owe him anything. Don’t ever forget that fact.”

“I try not to forget it, but when he harangues at me, it’s impossible to ignore him. He can be scary.”

“That’s because he’s a tyrant, and he enjoys lording himself over you. It helps him to feel superior, but we don’t have to *let* him be superior.”

“It’s easy to be strong when you’re at Parkhurst with me, but when I’m alone, I can never stand up to him. Mother always takes his side, so it’s two against one.”

“He has an enormous amount of gall to dictate any terms to you.”

“I understand that in my head, but he’s good at confusing me.”

Hannah scoffed at that. “Second of all, if you don’t wish to wed, your mother can’t make you. This isn’t the Middle Ages, so if she grows too manipulative, sneak away to London. You can live with me, and I’ll protect you from her. I swear to you that I will.”

She hadn’t planned to ever extend the offer. She already had too many burdens, but she couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be young and defenseless—and at Winston’s mercy.

When Winston had started in on Hannah, she’d been older and tougher than Rebecca. She’d had the wherewithal to pick up and flee. What if she hadn’t been able to escape? What if she’d been trapped under Winston’s cruel thumb?

“Would you talk to Mother for me?” Rebecca asked. “Winston too? They might listen to you.”

Hannah tamped down a groan. “Yes, I’ll talk to them. Don’t worry about it.”

“And I should continue to refuse Winston, right? If he orders me to sign over Parkhurst, I shouldn’t.”

“No, you definitely shouldn’t, and *you* can’t anyway. Our lawyer, Mr. Thumberton, would have to allow it. I’ll speak to him too, when I’m back in London. He doesn’t trust Winston anymore than I do, and he’d never agree.”

“What if I gave my half share to you?” Rebecca suddenly asked. “I don’t really want it, and I hate that Sir Edmund arranged such a tangled mess.”

It was on the tip of Hannah’s tongue to twirl in merry circles and say, *Yes, yes, you should sign it over to me immediately!*

But if she took advantage of her gullible sister, how was she any better or more ethical than Winston?

She swallowed down the excited reply that was anxious to burst out. “We shouldn’t ponder it now. We’ll wait until you’re older. You might feel differently.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I won’t ever feel differently. I’d like you to have it—just so long as you’d always permit me to remain here. I wouldn’t like to ever have to move away.”

“Yes, of course, you can remain. Forever. You should never fret about that.”

“Winston claims he can kick me out.”

“Winston is an ass, and you’re not paying any attention to him, remember?”

At the comment, Rebecca laughed, which Hannah was delighted to see. They kept on to the house, strolling slowly, enjoying the summer weather. Amelia served a huge Sunday dinner at two o’clock, so it was another awkward meal to be endured, then Hannah would have to have conversations with Winston and Amelia.

They were never pleasant, and she wasn’t keen for them to begin.

Finally, they arrived at the manor, and she proceeded to her bedchamber to wash and change her clothes. As she was walking down the hall, a door opened, and Viscount Marston stepped out. The sight of him was so unexpected that she had to blink several times to be sure she wasn’t hallucinating.

“Why are you still at Parkhurst?” she asked with quite a bit of exasperation.

He grinned his devil’s grin. “Obviously, I’ve surprised you.”

“I could have sworn you were leaving around seven.”

“I decided to tarry. You’re so entertaining, and my schedule is totally free, so I’m in no hurry to depart. When will you return to town?”

“Probably tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll head out tomorrow too.”

“Are you merely being a pest? Or are you trying to annoy me beyond my limit?”

“It’s both of those.” He nodded down the hall. “You should race to your room and do...whatever. Sunday dinner is about to be served. You shouldn’t be late.”

He whirled away and continued on. As he reached the stairs, he flashed a smile at her that was so delicious and so full of wicked promise that she was amazed it didn’t knock her over.

Was he really staying because of her? How could such a bizarre idea have lodged itself in his deranged male brain? Was he thinking she’d be glad he’d delayed?

Well, maybe she would be. Maybe she liked him more than she should, but she wouldn’t admit it, and she definitely would never let him know.

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“Hello, Hannah.” Hunter was amused when she jumped a foot. “I guess I’ve startled you.”

“You can’t be in here!”

He shrugged. “It’s mad, isn’t it?”

“Get out right now.”

“No.”

He was slouched in a chair in her sitting room. There was a liquor tray on the table in the corner, complete with three decanters of wine, which he found odd. He’d never have pegged her for a closet drinker.

He’d downed most of a bottle by himself, but then, he’d been waiting for her for an eternity.

He pushed himself to his feet and strutted over to the door. Before she realized his intent, he spun the key in the lock. Then he pulled it out

and stuck it in his pocket. He'd return it to her when he was finished, and he couldn't imagine when that might be.

He might have been outside his body and watching some other idiot behave precisely as he shouldn't. He was being reckless, pursuing a very dangerous course, but he couldn't steer himself in a saner direction. He seemed destined to crash into her.

She bristled with outrage. "Give me that key!"

"No."

"Give it to me! I demand it!"

"No," he said more sternly.

She was a tiny little thing, but she was brimming with fury. She went to the door, twisting the knob, as if she hadn't just observed him locking it. When she couldn't open it, she whipped around and absurdly threatened, "If you don't release me—immediately—I'll scream. I mean it! I will!"

He chuckled. "You will not. You'd never risk being caught with me. And might I suggest you keep your voice down? We can't have a servant saunter by and tattle to your stepmother that you have a man in your bedchamber."

She fretted and fumed, then she stomped by him, and she grabbed his wrist and tugged him along behind her. He followed obediently, like a puppet on a string. They left the sitting room for her bedroom, and she shut the door, sealing them in even more.

In the process, she'd further isolated them. It was exactly where he was delighted to be, but he figured—once she recognized her folly—she'd probably faint.

"What are you thinking?" Her volume was low, but incensed.

"I've been eager to slip away with you all day, but you deftly avoided my every attempt."

"Why wouldn't I avoid you? There's no reason we should be alone."

"I disagree, and I always get my way."

"You're a bully."

"Yes, I am."

"It's ludicrous that I should have to explain this concept to you, but I am a virtuous maiden, while you are a cad and a bounder with no reputation that can be mentioned in polite company. You can't sneak in and presume you'll be welcome."

"I'm already here, so it's a moot point. Aren't you glad I dared? Admit it. You're tickled to have me all to yourself."

"I am not tickled! I am livid, embarrassed, and even a tad afraid."

He scowled. "Afraid of what?"

"Of you! You are renowned for your bad habits and wretched morals! You might engage in any nefarious conduct, and I wouldn't be able to stop you."

"Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't do anything you didn't want me to do."

"Spoken like the scoundrel you are."

"Haven't you ever wondered if you've been a maiden too long? Perhaps it would be fun to misbehave. Why must every minute of your day be spent in absolute drudgery?"

"My days are not filled with drudgery. They are productive and busy, and you are being more irrational than ever. Would you go? Please? It's difficult for me to visit Parkhurst, and you're adding to my distress."

"I hate that your relatives are awful to you."

"Yes, I'm sure you are a bubbling cauldron of concern."

"If you would give me permission, I could take care of them for you. Especially Winston. I'd love to get my hands on him."

She blew out an exasperated breath. "How would you accomplish it? I'm simply dying to be apprised."

"For starters, I'd pound him into the ground for being such a pompous ass. I can't stand how he talks to you or his wife. I could teach him some lessons about manners. Shall I?"

"I'm flattered that you're worried about me, but no, I don't need you to beat any sense into Winston. Besides, I'm certain it wouldn't help."

"Won't you let me pummel him? I haven't delivered a sound thrashing in ages, and Winston Webster deserves one more than anyone I've ever met."

Hunter had frittered the hours away, dining and chatting with her family, watching as they bickered and hurled snide comments. There was such an undercurrent of dislike and disrespect in the house that he'd nearly grown dizzy just from witnessing it.

He'd felt as if he'd been stuck in the audience at a very lengthy theatrical play, and the actors were trapped in the story and couldn't exit

the stage.

Amelia Webster was mad as a hatter. Rebecca was naïve and slow-witted. Winston was a tyrant and fiend who strutted about as if the property was his. Hannah walked among them like a warrior goddess. Their barbs bounced off her like dull arrows, and she'd ignored them with an astuteness that was spectacular.

"You can't cure your boredom by punching Winston," she said.

"It would happen quickly. I wouldn't even break a sweat."

She spat out a miserable laugh. "I can't ever decide if you're being sincere or not."

"I'm sincere as an apoplexy. I don't like your relatives, and I'd like to put them in their place."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I can deal with them on my own. So if that's what you came to discuss, you can leave now."

She yanked the bedroom door open and gestured into the sitting room, as if he'd obey like a trained puppy. Hadn't she learned anything about him? He never listened to women, and he wasn't about to start with her.

"I have a few other topics on my mind," he said.

"Like what?"

He pulled her hand off the knob and shut the door again. There was no key to lock it, so he slapped a palm on it to block her in. She glared up at him, her green eyes sparking with ire, and she was even prettier when she was furious.

"I think you're deranged," she told him. "What are you hoping to achieve by dawdling with me?"

"I have no idea. I like women who are biddable and agreeable, but you never exhibit those traits, so I can't fathom what's driving me. For once, could you pretend to be sweet and accommodating?"

She grumbled with frustration. "You're really pushing your luck."

"I've always pushed my luck, and it's always brought me exactly what I crave."

He swooped in and kissed her, as he'd been dying to do. While he'd been surrounded by her family, he'd had to stare at her from a distance and conceal his heightened interest. He might have been a drowning man who'd suddenly burst to the surface and was being overwhelmed by too much air.

Powerful sensations were pelting him, ones that kindled his masculine instincts. Though it was bizarre and terrifying, he was anxious to have her for his very own. She fascinated him in an inexplicable way, so he would simply ride the wave that was cresting with her. He'd figure out the rest of it later on.

She hadn't wiggled away, hadn't scolded him. She joined in enthusiastically, and it was thrilling and wonderful. Despite how she fussed and protested, she was just as attracted to him as he was to her. Where would it lead? He believed it should *lead* somewhere wild and debauched, the trick being to persuade her that she would like to wind up there with him.

They were standing near her bed, and without asking, he staggered over and dropped her onto the mattress. He followed her down and stretched out atop her. It was a shocking move he shouldn't have made, but it seemed perfectly natural that he would. Except that it was immediately obvious he'd taken a step too far. She jerked away and glowered with irritation.

"It's bad enough that you blustered into my room," she said, "but I can't loaf on my bed with you."

"Why not? Who is there to know?"

"I will know, and I like to assume I have a strong moral compass. I won't allow you to manipulate me. I refuse to be a party to an indiscretion, for I'm positive you've committed thousands of them."

"Doesn't it feel grand though, to be here like this with me? I'm sure you don't mean to complain about it."

"This is how girls get themselves into trouble, and I won't travel down this road with you."

He grinned. "We'll see what path you're willing to travel before we're through."

"If I ever chose to ruin myself, it wouldn't be with a scapegrace like you."

"Who else would offer to help you? It's not as if a vicar or a saint would seduce you. I'm fairly certain cads are the only ones who are sufficiently dissolute."

"Don't be obnoxious."

"I'm deadly serious. Everyone agrees that cads are the most fun. Why would you trifle with a boring dolt instead?"



She looked as if she'd launch into a tirade about his low habits, but he couldn't listen. He'd spent his life being chastised over his failings, and he didn't need another lengthy repetition.

"Hannah...hush."

"I can't have you—"

"Hush!" He laid a finger on her lips. She obeyed him for once, and it was a stunning development. "I'll tiptoe out in a bit. I swear."

He began kissing her again, and he had to admit that he liked kissing her very much.

He wasn't the sort who rushed to the end of a dalliance. She was a maiden, so he was delighted to take the slow, scenic route to his destination. In order to encourage her to misbehavior, he had to guide her to that decision so she'd accept that it was the only possible conclusion.

He was overcome again by the notion that he should ask her to be his mistress. It would solve so many problems, for him *and* for her. After they parted, she'd walk away from the experience richer and happier. What female wouldn't want that?

Well, *she* was the type who wouldn't, but he was eager to convince her that she'd like it. The best course was to wear down her defenses.

He kissed her forever, but that was all he did. He didn't untie any laces or unbutton any buttons. He simply sampled her delicious mouth and ran his curious hands over her arms and thighs, imprinting her shape and size into his palms.

She jumped in with an incredible amount of vigor, almost as if she was engaged in a scientific experiment to prove whether she could enjoy herself or not. As to himself, he was bewildered over how sweet it was. He was being bombarded with the potent perception that he'd finally arrived precisely where he was supposed to be.

When he caught himself becoming too aroused, when he started to contemplate disrobing her, he halted and drew away. He gazed down at her, and it was the strangest thing, but his heart ached, as if it didn't fit under his ribs. Apparently, he was smitten as a green boy.

"Are we done?" she said, her exasperation returning with a vengeance. "Have I provided adequate entertainment for one evening?"

"I think I've had my fill—for now."

"Then if I ask you to go, would you? You're much bigger than I am,

so I can't toss you out bodily."

He pulled away from her and sat on the edge of the mattress. With him moving away from her, he'd expected her to leap up and put some space between them, but she merely smiled and stretched like a lazy cat.

"When are you leaving for London?" he asked her.

"It should be tomorrow, but I have to have some difficult chats with Winston and Amelia. We have many thorny issues to address, but I hate the conversations, so I avoid them until the last second."

"What are some of the issues?"

"They are just family complications. They wouldn't interest you."

"Would you like me to sit in on your discussions? I could furnish moral support, and if either of them upsets you, I can bully them into silence. And I'm still hoping you'll permit me to thrash Winston."

She chuckled. "I'd love to have an ally in the room, but it would be too humiliating for me to have you hear how they talk to me."

"Promise me that you'll confer with Attorney Thumberton again. You shouldn't carry this burden by yourself. You're too nice to evict them, but Thumberton wouldn't bat an eye. Why don't you let him?"

She sighed. "Could we not debate it? I've actually wound up being delighted that you snuck in, so don't ruin the moment by reminding me of how foolish I can be."

He could have kicked himself when he blurted out, "I could tarry until you're finished. We could ride to town together. I came on horseback, but I could rent a carriage. Would you like that?"

"If you were trapped with me for an entire day, you'd murder me before we arrived. You don't seem like the sort of fellow who would enjoy that much feminine company."

"I'm constantly surrounded by women, and I'm a very likable person. I know how to travel in a carriage with a female."

"Yes, but I'm sure your doxies are much more frivolous than me. I'd spend the hours trying to mold you into a better man, and I'm positive you wouldn't like it."

He snorted with amusement. He liked everything about her, and those odd fetters were tightening around his ankles again.

"I want to ask you a question," he said before he could stop himself. "I insist that you seriously reflect on your answer. Don't automatically refuse."

"I won't, so what is your question?"

He clasped her hand and linked their fingers, feeling absurdly perplexed over what he was about to do, but he would do it anyway. He was a spontaneous rogue who'd landed himself in all kinds of trouble by being reckless and impulsive. Evidently, his conduct with Hannah Graves would be no different.

The bottle of wine he'd drunk by himself wasn't helping either.

"I'm here because I thought you had been engaged to me," he said. "We both shrugged it off as a mistake, but maybe we shouldn't view it that way."

She frowned. "Meaning what?"

"My father picked Sir Edmund's daughter to be my bride. I didn't like the one who was offered, but what would *you* think of marrying me?" She nearly piped up with a rebuttal, and he hurried to add, "We're very compatible; you can't deny it. Why shouldn't we forge ahead? Imagine how much easier your life would be if I was your husband."

She scowled ferociously. "Why would you suggest it? I recognize it would be for the money and property in my dowry, but you already have plenty of that. *I* would be included in the deal, and I can't fathom why you'd consider it."

"We *like* each other."

"We do?"

"Yes. Don't pretend we don't."

"All right, I won't pretend."

"Friendship is a good basis for a marriage. We'd manage just fine, and I wouldn't have to search for someone else who—I'm convinced—would be much worse than you."

She laughed merrily. "If that was a genuine proposal, it has to be the most pathetic one ever voiced. You're eager to wed me because the next candidate might be worse? That's such a low bar that I don't even have to jump to climb over it."

He reddened with chagrin. "I guess I didn't explain myself very well."

She sat up too and thrilled him by resting a palm on his cheek. "I understood what you were telling me, but I can't wed you. It's nothing personal."

"Nothing personal! You just rejected my proposal!"

“Don’t get all huffy on me,” she said. “You are nicer and more charming than I realized, but I am absolutely certain you don’t really want me. By your own admission, you like women who are biddable and obedient, and I could never carry on as you were expecting. I’d drive you mad before the first month was out.”

“Would you like to ponder your reply for awhile?”

“I don’t have to.”

He stared at her, then he smirked. “It was worth a shot. If you’d agreed, you would have saved me an enormous amount of time and aggravation.”

“I suppose it would have saved you *time*, but the *aggravation* would never have ended.”

He’d made a complete fool of himself in front of her again. Why did he act like such an idiot around her? He’d proposed, but he probably hadn’t been sincere. He was lucky she’d refused, and he’d dodged a bullet. Hadn’t he?

He figured he had, but strangely, it seemed as if he’d lost out on a vital prize, and he was extremely morose. He had to depart or he’d grow even more ridiculous.

He leaned in and stole a quick kiss. “I don’t know if I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I hope you will.”

“Take care of yourself, and if you ever need anything, would you contact me? I’d be happy to stand your friend.”

“Here at our parting, don’t you dare be wonderful. It’s annoying.”

“And if you ever decide you’d like me to pound Winston Webster into the ground, send a fast messenger. I’ll come racing to your side.”

She smiled. “I will keep that in mind.”

He slid away and walked out without glancing back, for he couldn’t bear to have a final glimpse of her pretty green eyes. He’d behaved stupidly with her, but then, that was typical conduct for him. She had better sense than he did, and she’d prevented him from falling off the cliff where he’d been perched.

After he returned to town, perhaps he’d buy her a thank you gift—for saving him from himself.

He bristled with disgust, unlocked her door, and tiptoed out without checking if the hall was clear. If he was discovered sneaking out, he

wasn't concerned one way or the other.

## CHAPTER TEN

"I mainly have one comment."

"I hope you'll be brief. I'm very busy today."

Winston smiled an ingratiating smile at Hannah, praying he looked interested, but it was difficult to feign enthusiasm or cordiality.

They were in his library, and she'd summoned him down as if he were a common servant. She'd entered the room before he had, so she was sitting behind the massive oak desk, and he'd been forced onto a chair across from her.

Their positions were completely reversed, providing stark evidence of who owned Parkhurst. The reminder was galling, and he could have demanded they switch seats, but she'd have refused, and they'd have quarreled. Because his life revolved around her letting him remain at Parkhurst, he wouldn't initiate a spat he couldn't win.

He had to pick his battles with her. She was about to head back to London on the mail coach, and he wanted her gone. He wouldn't do anything to delay her.

While growing up, he'd had no money or prospects. He'd obtained a university education through scholarship and hard work. From the moment he'd met Amelia, he'd viewed her as his route to the grander status he'd deserved. She'd succumbed to his determined seduction, and by the time she'd left to marry Sir Edmund, she'd been totally ensnared and had sworn she'd wait for him forever.

It had been a long decade of twiddling his thumbs until Sir Edmund died. His demise had cleared the road for Winston, but during that period, he'd tried to glom onto some other wealthy ninny, but he hadn't had any luck, so he'd had to settle for Amelia.

The instant she'd been widowed, he'd swooped in and attached himself. He'd assumed he would be the owner of Parkhurst through his marriage to her, but instead of being a landed, prosperous gentleman, he was husband to a poverty-stricken harpy whom no one liked or respected.

By wedding him so quickly, she was deemed to be a devious

adulterous with corrupt morals.

Parkhurst had been his sole opportunity to raise himself up, but her late husband hadn't bequeathed it to her, so Winston was simply a tenant who was subject to the whims of his fickle landlords, that being Rebecca and Hannah.

He didn't worry about Rebecca. She was too submissive to ever stir any trouble, but Hannah was a different story entirely. She felt Winston was an interloper who should never have been allowed to reside at Parkhurst.

Well, he'd deal with her eventually. She believed she was powerful and more important than he was, but she had no idea of how driven Winston was to attain what he craved. In the end, Parkhurst would be his, and Hannah wouldn't be able to stop it from happening.

"Aren't you leaving for town?" he asked. "If you dawdle, you'll miss your coach."

"I'm tracking the time. I won't miss it."

"Please tell me you're taking the bastard boy with you."

"His name is Jackson. Jackson Graves."

Winston ignored the taunt. "I realize you're not fond of Amelia, but it was incredibly rude of you to throw him in her face."

"Your opinion is noted."

Winston was incensed by her flippant nonchalance. "I'm serious, Hannah. Sir Edmund was your father, so it's fitting that you harbor affectionate memories of him, but it's outrageous of you to permit the boy to visit."

"When did you move to Parkhurst, Winston?" was her snotty reply. "And when did you wed Amelia? Should we debate whether Amelia or Father was the most unfaithful in their marriage?"

She never ceased her castigation for his swift actions after Sir Edmund's death, and if he hadn't been so dependent on her for his lodging, he'd have retaliated. As it was, he could only fume and silently vow to get even.

He had to recollect that she rarely came to Parkhurst. She'd put him in charge, but she'd supplied very scant guidance or restrictions as to how he should exercise his role. The result was that he'd found many methods for enriching himself at her expense, but then, it wasn't fair that she'd been placed above him in the family hierarchy.

After Winston had shackled himself to Amelia, he should have become the patriarch, but no. He was beholden to Hannah for every tiny thing, and he'd never forgive her for being elevated above him.

He widened his smile. "What is it you need from me, and we should probably hurry. We love to have you stay with us, but I recognize how much you detest Parkhurst. I'd hate to have you compelled to tarry for an extra day."

"Yes, and you're always so glad to see me." Her tone was extremely sarcastic.

He sighed, as if she was a great trial. "Hannah, Hannah, Hannah, why must you engage in these petty attempts to antagonize me?"

"It's so enjoyable. I can't resist."

"You're twenty-five this year. It's a mystery to me why you still act like a child."

"If you don't like my attitude or my conduct, you don't have to remain at Parkhurst. You're free to slither away whenever you wish."

It was the cudgel she held over his head, and she relished pounding him with it.

"Amelia and Rebecca would be crushed if you kicked us out," he said, "so I guess you and I simply have to tolerate one another. For their sakes."

She snorted at that. "I'll come right to the point. Rebecca informs me that you are nagging at her to sign over her share of Parkhurst."

When his mischief was exposed, his impulse was to deny any transgression. "I can't fathom why she would spread such a horrendous falsehood, and you're aware of how scatterbrained she can be. I've never mentioned the topic to her."

"You're the worst liar, Winston, so hear me and hear me well: Rebecca will not ever give you her share of Parkhurst. Our lawyer, Mr. Thumberton, would have to agree, and he never will. Especially now, when she's so young. She's not competent to relinquish it, so stop your badgering. It won't work."

"Her mother is convinced that Rebecca can marry very high, and she's determined to include Parkhurst in the dowry. Would you rather have it go to Rebecca's husband? It would mean you'd wind up owning it with a stranger. Is that a better arrangement?"

"Rebecca isn't anxious to be a bride. Not for many years yet."



“Amelia may have something to say about that.”

“I’m sure she will, but *I* will have something to say too, so the ownership of Parkhurst is none of your business. Rebecca and I will deal with any issues, and I’m sorry to report that *you* will not be consulted.”

A muscle ticked in his cheek. Hannah was so smug, so confident. She assumed it was perfectly acceptable to lord herself over Winston. How much longer would he blithely bow down?

He wondered if it had ever occurred to her that he might have other, more cunning plans to obtain Parkhurst. First and foremost, Amelia could pass away. If she did, Winston would latch onto Rebecca and wed her immediately.

In the interim, he needed money. A huge pot of money, and—to satisfy his creditors—he needed it in the next thirty days. He had several schemes brewing that would deliver what he sought, and Hannah could never prevent him from amassing what he required. She was mad if she thought she could.

“That’s all I had to tell you,” she said, “so this meeting is concluded.”

She stood, so he had to stand too. His temper was raging, and she was lucky he didn’t stomp around the desk, grab her, and shake her until her teeth rattled. Her insolence was unbearable, and as she flitted by him, he clasped her arm and yanked her to a halt. It was a stupid move, but he couldn’t calm down.

“You seem to presume you have some authority over me and the women in my family,” he told her. “You don’t, and I will not have you bossing me with regard to them.”

“Amelia is your wife, so I concur that she is your responsibility, but unless you’d like to admit that the rumors about Rebecca’s parentage are true, she is Sir Edmund’s daughter and *my* sister. You have no authority over her, and if you continue to harass her, I shall begin legal proceedings to become her guardian. I suggest you tread cautiously.”

He realized he sounded like a petulant child, but he couldn’t keep himself from saying, “You think you’re so smart.”

“Yes, actually, I think I’m very, very smart, and you’re hurting my arm. Let go of it.”

He simply tightened his grip. He was so furious that little red dots

had formed on the edge of his vision, and he worried he was about to suffer an apoplexy. For once, he wasn't certain how the encounter would end.

But rash conduct was forestalled by the door swinging open behind them. He peered over his shoulder to see who had arrived, and it provided Hannah with the opportunity to jerk away.

"There you are, Miss Graves," Viscount Marston said. "I'm about to ride out, and I've been looking for you so I could tell you goodbye."

The atmosphere in the room was filled with loathing and spite, and Marston was no fool. He studied Hannah, then Winston, then he sauntered over to her. He was a big man, and he towered over Winston in a manner that was annoying and intimidating.

"You two seem to be having quite a heated discussion," he said to Hannah. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she claimed, but she was rubbing her arm.

"You don't appear to be *fine*, Miss Graves. In my opinion, you are a tad distressed. Why is that?"

Hannah glared at Winston, and it took an eternity for her to answer. "We were just arguing. Don't concern yourself."

"When I walked in, I could swear Mr. Webster was manhandling you. Was he?"

Hannah didn't reply, didn't rush to insist that she and Winston were merely talking animatedly, and Marston viewed her silence as an affirmation. He stepped to Winston and seized his shirt, lifting him slightly so the tips of his shoes brushed the rug.

"I'm known as a lazy scapegrace," Marston said, "so people aren't aware that I have a very bad temper."

"Put me down, sir!" Winston demanded.

"I will in a minute," Marston said, "but first, I must explain this to you: I don't like to see a lady abused. I'm funny that way."

"I didn't...didn't *abuse* Hannah," Winston blustered. "We were debating some contentious estate matters."

"No, you weren't. You were browbeating and threatening her, to which I take great offense."

"My relationship with Hannah is none of your affair."

"I'm making it my affair," Marston said. "Don't ever touch her again. Not ever. In the future, if I ever learn that you've laid a finger on

her, I will return to Parkhurst and kill you.”

As if Winston weighed no more than a feather, Marston hurled him away. He slammed into the desk and fell to the floor. A jar of quills went flying, and a chair tipped over with a loud crash.

Then, as if no vicious incident had transpired, Marston smiled at Hannah and said, “May I escort you out to your carriage? A footman told me you need to hurry.”

“Yes, I should hurry,” Hannah said, “and I would be delighted if you could escort me out.”

They strolled off together, without a backward glance, but Winston didn’t look away from them. He’d been attacked and cast aside as if he were a sack of rubbish, but no one was ever allowed to treat him as Marston had just treated him.

Marston’s masculine posturing was Hannah’s fault, so Winston would have to get even for the insult that had been inflicted. Retaliation would be sweet, and he could guarantee she would be sorry forever.

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“If I asked you to never visit Parkhurst again,” Hunter said to Hannah, “would you oblige me?”

“No. Parkhurst is my home and I’m its owner. I can’t abandon the place.”

“If I *begged* you to stay away, would you consider it?”

She chuckled. “No, but thank you for your assistance in there. I wouldn’t have ever thought I’d be thrilled to see you, but I was.”

“It’s generally assumed that I’m a sluggard, but I can be useful on occasion.”

“You definitely surprised me.”

They were out in the driveway, next to the carriage that would carry her and Jackson into the village, so they could catch the mail coach to town. Their bags had been loaded, and Jackson was lurking off to the side, avidly listening to them.

Hunter’s horse was saddled, Nate’s too, although his friend was nowhere to be found. Hunter hoped he wouldn’t have to delay until Nate was ready to depart. Once Hannah’s vehicle rolled away, he wanted to head out too. With her no longer in residence, the property held no appeal whatsoever.

Winston Webster had been left behind in the library, in a crumpled heap, and Hunter was amazed by how grand it had felt to pummel the obnoxious idiot.

Jackson spoke up. "How did he assist you, Hannah? What happened?"

Hannah lied and said, "I was arguing with Winston, and Lord Marston interrupted us at just the right moment. It was nothing."

Hunter corrected her false story. "It wasn't *nothing*. Mr. Webster was manhandling her, and I stopped him."

"Tell me you pounded him into the ground," Jackson said.

"No, but I threatened to kill him if he ever touched her again."

"Thank you," Jackson said. "I appreciate it."

Jackson was still a boy, but he appeared suitably incensed, as if he might march back inside and deliver the thrashing Hunter had failed to supply. On observing his ire, Hunter decided he liked him very much.

"If he ever bothers her in the future," Hunter said to Jackson, "promise you'll let me know."

"I will."

Hannah clucked her tongue like a mother hen. "First off, don't talk about me as if I'm not here. Second of all, neither of you is my nanny. Don't collude as if you're my guards. I don't require protection. Especially not from Winston. And *you!*" she said to Hunter. "I won't have you bragging about physical violence in front of my brother. I'm trying to mold his character, and I won't have you pretending it's an acceptable way to prove a point."

"Who's pretending?" Hunter huffed.

He and Jackson shared a look, one that they both understood perfectly.

*Women!*

They visually agreed that Hannah needed their help, despite what she might suppose, and Hunter wondered what Hannah's plans were for Jackson when he was older. She'd probably send him to university or push him into the clergy. They were the type of tepid, boring routes that females liked to encourage.

But Hunter suspected Jackson had many dubious talents that would make him effective at other, less savory endeavors. Maybe, if she couldn't devise a viable path, he, Hunter, would bring Jackson into his

own household.

Such a perceptive, cunning ruffian could furnish many valuable skills.

“Must you ride in the mail coach?” he asked her. “If it’s a question of finances, I’m happy to rent a private carriage for you.”

“I would never permit you to go to so much trouble on my behalf.”

He hated to have her taking the public conveyance. Though it was odd to admit, their dalliance the prior night had altered his feelings about her. He felt linked to her, as if he possessed a duty to watch over her.

That stupid marriage proposal was causing it. He realized it was. In light of his enormous vanity, he should have been infuriated by her rejection, but it simply had him liking her *more*, which was absurd.

He was annoyingly attached to her, and even though it was their farewell, he was being pelted by the strongest sense that he wasn’t done with her. And *she* wasn’t done with him.

“I’m glad I came to Parkhurst,” he said.

“To my great shock, I’m glad too. It was lovely to have you visit.”

He scoffed. “I’m positive you don’t mean it, but it’s sweet of you to say so.”

“Are you headed to town too?”

“Yes. I’m busy with some business dealings, and I have to finish them.”

He was referring to his mistress interviews. He had to wrap them up, get rid of Isabella, and jump into a new relationship. It was all tedious and risk-filled, and now that he’d met and trifled with Hannah, he was conflicted over whether he should pick another paramour. Why not concentrate on the marital search his father was demanding?

Well, the answer to that was easy: He was in no hurry to wed, and with Neville’s disastrous foray into matchmaking with the Graves sisters, Hunter was in no mood to have him try again.

“You have business dealings?” Hannah had an impish gleam in her eye. “I thought you were an indolent sloth, so I’m stunned to hear it.”

“I’m very rich, Miss Graves. All the men in my family are rich. We don’t stay that way by loafing.”

She smirked. “I will keep telling myself that’s true.”

To his vast surprise, she reached out and clasped his hand to squeeze

his fingers, then she pulled away, and a footman guided her into the vehicle. Jackson, the canny little blighter, had noted every second of the intimate, furtive exchange.

He glowered at Hunter, warning him to be careful with her, then he climbed in too. The footman shut and latched the door, and the driver cracked the whip to get the horses moving.

Hannah leaned out the window and called, "If you pass us on the lane, be sure to wave!"

"I will," he called back, rather too excitedly.

Then the carriage lurched off, and it was very strange, but he was extremely bereft over their parting, as if he missed her already, but that was an insane sentiment.

He yanked away and went into the manor to find Nate.

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"Miss Rebecca! There you are!"

Nate smiled and rushed down the deserted hall so he could stand next to her. She blanched and stepped away. It was an exasperating indication that he hadn't charmed her yet.

Hunter was eager to leave, so Nate's minutes at Parkhurst were slipping away. He hadn't coaxed Amelia Webster into giving him a reason to tarry, and he'd grown so desperate that he'd pretended to trip and sprain his ankle on the stairs, but the blasted woman had been unconcerned and had insisted he'd be fine.

He had to devise a ruse that would provide an excuse to return to Parkhurst, and it would have to be soon. Rebecca Graves was a wealthy plum that was ripe for the picking. He had to glom onto her before any of his poverty-stricken acquaintances learned about her.

Each candidate who presented himself would entice Mrs. Webster more than Nate.

At the moment though, with Hunter chomping at the bit to depart, he couldn't think straight. He'd have to ponder his options on the ride to London. If he had to kidnap Rebecca and forcibly elope with her to Scotland, he suspected that was what he might do. He was that anxious to have it resolve in his favor.

"Hello, Mr. Carew," Rebecca said. "Or is it goodbye? Aren't you off to London this morning?"

"Yes, but I simply must see you again. May I stop by in the future?"

"You'd have to ask my mother," she maddeningly replied.

"I doubt she'd agree."

"Probably not."

"But what sort of girl are you, Miss Rebecca? Have you a sense of adventure? Or will you do exactly as your mother bids you?"

"I'm usually very obedient."

"That's because you were a child in the past. Aren't you a young lady now? Shouldn't you be able to choose your own friends? I mean, your mother is determined to select a husband for you, but in the first attempt, and with very little thought, she settled on Hunter Stone! He could never have loved you."

"I'm positive he wouldn't have."

"I, on the other hand, am totally smitten. It has to count for something." He softened his expression, hoping he looked besotted and overcome. "Tell me I have a chance with you."

She frowned, seeming confused and worried. "I shouldn't tell you that. I'm not supposed to let you be so forward."

He grinned. "I can't help myself. You're fond of me, aren't you?"

Her frown deepened. "I try to like everyone. Isn't that best?"

He breathed a fake sigh of relief, and he clutched a fist over his heart. "Your opinion will soothe me on my long journey today."

Footsteps sounded behind them, and he slid away from her as a footman appeared down the hall.

"Viscount Marston is ready to leave," the dolt said, "and he requests that you join him down in the driveway."

"Are our horses prepared?" Nate asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then I guess I'll be off." He nodded to Rebecca. "It was thrilling to meet you, Miss Rebecca, and I expect I will see you again soon."

"It's always nice to have company."

He winked at her, as if they shared a special secret, then he spun away and dashed down the stairs and outside, where Hunter was checking the straps on his saddle.

"There you are," Hunter said. "I've had servants hunting for you everywhere."

"I was saying goodbye to Miss Rebecca."

“Why would you have been?”

Nate raised a brow. “She’s wild for me.”

Hunter scoffed. “I’m certain that’s a complete misreading of the situation on your part.”

“She told me so, and she pleaded with me to hurry back.”

“Her mother wouldn’t be too keen on the idea.”

“There’s no rule that forces me to apprise Mrs. Webster.”

Hunter shook his head with irritation and climbed onto his horse. Nate quickly checked his own saddle, and he climbed up too. He’d assumed they would trot off without delay, but Hunter was content to dawdle for a minute.

He glared at the house, his disgust evident. “This trip was such a waste of time.”

“I beg to differ. In my view, it was extremely productive.”

Hunter scowled at him. “In what way?”

“You’re not interested in Rebecca, are you? You won’t honor the contract your father negotiated?”

“Gad, no. I would never wed a child, particularly one who’s plain and insipid.”

“So if *I* try to win her, you won’t be upset? I won’t be encroaching on your territory or anything, will I?”

“No, I have no territory here, but you should stay away from her. She’s not mature enough to be a bride, and even if she was, *you* are not the rogue she should have as her husband.”

“How can you be so sure?” Nate huffed.

“I’ve known you for ages, Nate. You’re a scapegrace and a liar, and she needs a spouse who’s kind and considerate. She deserves someone better than you.”

“She’s rich,” Nate pointed out like a dunce. “She has a whole dowry just sitting there, waiting to be grabbed by the smartest suitor.”

“Yes, but *you* aren’t the one to grab it.”

“Why would you imagine you’re entitled to an opinion? You’re not my father, my employer, or my captain, so you’re in no position to boss me.”

“I’m bossing you anyway.”

“You haven’t a clue what it’s like to be me,” Nate complained. “I won’t allow you to ruin this chance.”



“My advice is this: If you’re so hot to marry, find a trollop—maybe a disreputable widow—who’d be happy with a man like you. You like to gamble, carouse, and engage in offensive behaviors. There are plenty of women who enjoy those same antics. You should latch onto one of them rather than a sacrificial lamb like Rebecca Graves.”

“She could grow to like me.”

“No, she couldn’t, and it’s clear your devious mind is working on how you could pull this off, so I’m warning you away. In fact, I’m ordering it.”

“Ordering it! We’re not in the army anymore, so you have some bloody nerve to command me.”

Hunter stared him down in that potent manner he had. He could be pompous and dictatorial, and his arrogant tendencies grated on Nate. On this occasion, when there was so much money in the balance, his words were especially galling.

Hunter had always been wealthy, and Nate wasn’t, so he never understood how Nate struggled. Nate wouldn’t be lectured.

“I’m serious about this,” Hunter said. “Swear to me that you’ll leave her alone.”

His expression was steely and unrelenting, and Nate fumed and fidgeted. Finally, he grumbled, “All right, all right, I swear I’ll leave her alone.”

“Thank you. Now let’s get going. I’m sick of this wretched place, and I hope to never see it again.”

Hunter yanked on the reins and cantered off, but Nate didn’t follow immediately. He peered at the house with incredible yearning. He could vividly picture himself ensconced at Parkhurst. He’d be king of the castle, strolling through the parlors in his supper jacket, sipping a brandy in his library. He ached for the prospect to come true with a hunger that was almost painful.

He gazed at Hunter’s retreating back and murmured, “I didn’t mean it, Hunter. I’m sorry, but Rebecca Graves—and Parkhurst—have to be mine.”

He kicked his horse into a gallop and raced after his friend.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Are you engaged? Shall we celebrate?”

“No, I am not engaged.” Hunter glared at his father and said, “Thanks for nothing.”

“What does that mean?” Neville asked.

“In your correspondence with Mrs. Webster, she failed to mention a pertinent fact, namely that there are two daughters who call themselves *Miss Graves*.”

“And...?”

“I met Miss Hannah Graves here in London, and I liked her very much. When you urged me to wed Miss Graves of Parkhurst, I assumed it was her, but when I arrived in the country, I encountered a slight problem.”

“That being...?”

“Mrs. Webster’s daughter is Miss Rebecca Graves. She’s plain, shy, and barely out of the schoolroom, so she is completely inappropriate to be my bride. It would have been nice if you’d have researched the matter before you dumped me into the middle of such a morass.”

“Well, obviously, Mrs. Webster concealed necessary information. What is your plan now?”

“I have no plan. The debacle you engineered made me remember that I’m not interested in matrimony. I should have known not to trust you.”

They were at Neville’s town house, seated on a sofa, with supper about to be served. A few of his father’s most devoted friends were present for the meal, and people were chatting and drinking wine. They were a group of aging wastrels, accompanied by their current mistresses who—in their day—had cut a disgusting swath through London’s social circles.

They’d been rich, entitled dandies who’d been legendary in their penchant for vice and corrupt reveling. Neville was entering his fifties, so he was slowing down, but given the right circumstances, he could still behave in shocking ways.

Isabella was sitting with them. With Hunter's return to town, he'd stumbled back into their relationship as if he hadn't been away and trying to get married. He'd restarted his mistress search too, an issue that was causing rancor to flare between them.

He was ready to be shed of her, and even if he couldn't find an intriguing replacement, he'd part with her when her contract was up. He was bored and eager for several aspects of his life to change. She would be the first to go.

She'd been delighted to hear that the match with Miss Graves had fallen through, and she'd even scheduled a party to celebrate the ruined engagement. Hunter was conflicted over whether it was the sort of event that ought to be celebrated. The enthusiasm with which she'd jumped into the arrangements told him plenty about her true character, but he was almost finished with her, so he wasn't about to waste any energy quarreling.

"I'm glad you've decided not to proceed," she said. "You're the consummate bachelor. Any girl who attached herself to you would wind up miserable forever."

Neville liked loose women—they were the only kind he could abide—but he'd never been partial to Isabella.

"Hunter has to wed," Neville said to her, his tone curt, "and he has to choose someone quickly. You don't get to have an opinion about it, and I won't have you reinforcing his idiotic inclination to remain single."

"I wasn't reinforcing it," she claimed. "I was merely stating my impression that he would be an awful husband. Why push him into a situation where he'd be unhappy?"

Hunter snorted at that. "Yes, Neville, why would you wish me to be unhappy? After all, you've had such great endings with your own trips into nuptial bliss. I can understand why you'd hope to convince me it's grand."

"We're not discussing my marital foibles," his father said. "We're discussing you and your need to pick a bride."

"I'd rather not," Hunter flippantly responded. "I'd rather eat supper and move on from the Graves family."

Isabella piped in with, "You're lucky you figured out the error before you proposed to the wrong person."

"I was lucky," Hunter said, "although I wouldn't have minded Hannah Graves. For her, I'd have been tempted." He peered over at his father. "Did I tell you she owns a bookshop and lending library here in the city? She runs it herself, although she has guidance from Thumberton. He keeps an eye on her."

Hunter liked having the opportunity to speak about Hannah. Since he'd returned from Parkhurst, he'd nearly stopped by her shop a dozen times to see how she was faring, but that would be deranged conduct, so he'd stayed away.

"She owns a shop?" Neville said. "She runs it herself? Thank goodness Thumberton is in the picture. When her mother contacted me, I had no idea she was so unusual."

"Mrs. Webster isn't her mother. She's Miss Graves's stepmother, and Mrs. Webster has no authority to betroth her. Apparently, Miss Graves has no guardian, so she could select a fiancé for herself without Mrs. Webster's interference."

"She could engage herself?" Neville said. "With property in the balance? That is the strangest notion I've ever heard."

"Yes, but she believes men are idiots, so matrimony isn't on the table with her."

Neville snickered. "Every woman yearns to wed. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"I'm not interested in it," Isabella said.

"Liar." Neville caustically studied how closely she was snuggled to Hunter. "If Hunter proposed this very second, you'd leap at the chance. Wouldn't she, Hunter?"

Isabella's cheeks heated. "I hate that you've put him on the spot about me."

"You're my son's latest mistress, Isabella," Neville coldly said, "and you should never forget the place you occupy in my family. And you won't occupy it for much longer, will you? Hasn't your contract with Hunter just about expired?"

It was a horrid remark, and Hunter would have warned Neville to be silent, but Isabella had had enough.

"It's clear you're out of sorts with me this evening," she said to Neville, "so I'll leave you and Hunter to enjoy yourselves without me interrupting."

She stood and stomped off in a huff. Neville's friends peeked over to assess the brief kerfuffle she'd caused with her exit from the parlor, and they smirked into their glasses, not terribly surprised to have Isabella fuming.

All of them had constantly been attached to flamboyant slatterns. They were doxies who eschewed moral living and grabbed onto the debauched existence the demimonde provided. They had tempers that flared hotly when they were irritated.

The men were used to it. They were wed to more demur, reticent females, and they liked the two varieties that shaped their worlds.

"You can be such an ass, Neville," Hunter said to him.

Neville scoffed. "Isabella has grown too possessive of you. Best watch your back as you set her aside."

"I've never needed nuptial advice from you, and I definitely don't need your advice as to how I should handle my paramour. You're not exactly a fellow who should furnish romantic instruction to anybody."

"It's my bad choices that make me such an expert."

"There's not a single person in the kingdom who deems you to be an expert at amour."

Neville sipped his wine, and he was looking older again—and tired. Hunter glanced away, refusing to feel sorry for him. It was how Neville had coaxed him into visiting Parkhurst, and he wouldn't allow his father to spur him to rash decisions in the future.

"Let's talk about Hannah Graves," Neville said. "The one you liked? Tell me more about her."

"The only relevant fact is that she's not about to marry."

"I could persuade her."

"With what? With a bribe? Or maybe with our elevated status? She's not impressed by us, and if you tried to claim she should be impressed, she'd laugh in your face."

"You'd be amazed by how I can coerce a female."

"No, I wouldn't, and as to Miss Graves, even if you could wear her down, I would never betroth myself. She's the half-owner of Parkhurst. Sir Edmund had two daughters, from his two wives, and he bequeathed the property to Hannah and her sister."

"Hannah, is it? It sounds as if you became cordial."

"We didn't."

“Are you sure about that?”

Hunter ignored the question. “Sir Edmund has a bastard son who’s popped up too.”

At his mentioning Jackson, Hunter wanted to ask Neville if *he* had ever sired any bastards, but it wasn’t a conversation he should have when Neville’s parlor was full of guests. Then again, if Neville had some natural children, his guests likely all knew about them.

“He was a rutting dog,” Neville said, “so that’s not news. Did the boy receive anything?”

“No, and Sir Edmund gave money to his widow that she’s already squandered. And he left the estate to his daughters. It’s an insane tangle.”

“I can’t imagine his reasoning.”

“The dunce who weds either girl will toss himself into a dual ownership with the other sister, then with her husband once she’s married.”

“What a ridiculous situation. I wonder if Thumberton drafted the Last Will. I can’t believe he’d have permitted Sir Edmund to behave so stupidly. Yet Sir Edmund was a pompous blowhard. Thumberton probably couldn’t dissuade him.” Neville added, “If you’re not keen on Miss Graves, you have to let me pick someone else.”

“No, I don’t, and I can’t oblige you in this. You’ve never had my best interests at heart, and I have no idea why I assumed this scheme would be any different.”

“I’ve always had your best interests at heart. Your brothers’ too. I’m stunned that you remember it that way.”

“We shouldn’t invent a history that never transpired. I was raised like an orphan, by lazy, incompetent servants.”

“You turned out fine.”

“You’re the only one who thinks so.”

Neville’s friend, Sybil Jones, strolled by. She managed the gambling club where Hunter and Neville were premier members. Hunter was often curious if she and Neville were more than friends. He’d once inquired of Neville, and Neville had insisted that he’d never be brave enough to seduce her.

She gobbled up men for her dinner, and she spit them out when she was finished, their bones picked clean.

To Hunter's surprise, Neville watched her intently, his fondness so blatantly clear that Hunter said, "Are you and Sybil finally involved?"

"Gad, no. She recognizes what a wastrel I am. I have no secrets from her, and she detests me."

"You could wed her, and she'd take over your house and life in a manner you might enjoy. From how she runs her club, it's obvious she has many skills. She might be the wife you always hoped to find."

"I'm afraid of her. If she was my wife, I couldn't carry on as I do. She'd expect me to shape up and act sensibly. Then where would I be?"

"At least you *like* her. That's more than I can say for your two previous brides."

"I like her now, but if I've learned one thing about matrimony, it's this: The process alters a woman. You presume you're getting a sweet, biddable girl, but after the vows are spoken, she can become a shrew."

"You're telling me this at the same time you're pushing me to marry. You're not exactly encouraging me to heed you."

"I could talk to Hannah Graves. I swear I could change her mind."

"You are not talking to Miss Graves, and your marital search on my behalf is ended." Neville smiled slyly, providing stark evidence that he was considering mischief, and Hunter said, "I'm not joking, Neville. You will *not* pester Miss Graves."

"Spoilsport," Neville grumbled, and he threw up his hands in disgust. "You're determined to be a brat, so I'll leave her alone, and I'll leave you alone too. Go ahead and remain a bachelor. You can dawdle and play until I eventually pass away. You can let the title lapse and our name fade into oblivion. Why would I care if you abandon your responsibility to me?"

Hunter rolled his eyes. "Your attempt at melodrama is humorous, but it won't work. Why don't you harass Warwick and Sheridan? Maybe they'll rush to the altar for you."

"I absolutely plan to begin harassing them, but you're the oldest, so we must settle your affairs first."

"It's not happening, Neville, and if you nag, we'll fight. I'd rather not bicker, but is that what you want?"

"No, I don't want that."

"I should locate Isabella and calm her down before we're called into supper. If I don't, she'll glower through the meal and give you

indigestion.”

“You shouldn’t waste your energy on doxies like her.”

Hunter had just downed a swallow of wine, and he choked on it and pounded a fist on his chest. “In light of your history with slatterns, that might be the most ludicrous comment you’ve ever uttered in my presence.”

He stood and walked off, wondering why he visited his father. Neville was an unscrupulous prig, and that problem couldn’t be fixed. Hunter especially couldn’t fix it.

With Neville aging, he was having regrets about how he’d carried on over the decades, but Hunter couldn’t bear to listen to his moralistic advice, particularly when so much of his bad conduct had sent consequences raining down on Hunter and his brothers.

He marched off to find Isabella, not eager to loaf by her side, but figuring it was better than enduring another second of Neville’s drivel.

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Hannah rounded a corner, and there—like magic—was Hunter Stone.

She blinked over and over to be sure it was him, and yes, he was really there in front of her. She wasn’t daydreaming.

Since returning from her horrid trip to Parkhurst, she’d pondered him constantly, so if she’d conjured him into a hallucination, she wouldn’t have been surprised. Every time the door opened at her shop, her pulse would race, as she would be certain it was him, stopping by to flirt with her.

She was confused about what had occurred between them in the country, but it had been sweet and riveting. He had a reputation as a scapegrace and libertine, but he was actually quite marvelous. She felt as if he was the only person she’d ever encountered who truly understood her, and she’d missed him very, very much.

Why had he stayed away? It had to indicate that, whatever fond feelings had been generated on her end, they hadn’t flourished on his. He was surrounded by glamorous women, and he regularly engaged in dalliances. No doubt he’d been humored by tedious, provincial Hannah Graves.

After he’d ridden away from Parkhurst, he probably hadn’t thought



about her again.

She was at Sybil Jones's beautiful home, out in the garden and strolling down one of the groomed paths. The property skirted the river, and Hannah had been enjoying the view before she left for her much more meager lodging in the heart of the city.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Miss Jones had just hosted her monthly meeting of female proprietors. No men were welcome, so Hannah had no idea why Hunter Stone was present. It was like a gift, wrapped in a pretty bow just for her, and she filled her eyes with the sight of him.

He was wearing a blue coat, tan trousers, and knee-high black boots. His clothes were expensive and perfectly-tailored to enhance his masculine physique. His golden hair was loose and curling over his shoulders, and it gleamed in the bright sunshine, making him look dashing and splendid.

He hadn't seen her yet, and fleetingly, she debated whether to call to him, but she didn't. Because he hadn't visited her, she was positive she'd misread their relationship.

She would have tiptoed away, but he moved before she could, so he was facing directly toward her. He blanched with astonishment, then he smiled the most delicious smile. Apparently, she was still warmly regarded. What a lovely discovery!

"Hannah Graves!" he said. "As I live and breathe! Is it you?"

He hurried over to her, and he reached out and clasped her hands, giving them an affectionate squeeze. Then he dipped in and kissed her on the cheek.

"Hello, Viscount Marston."

"It's Hunter, remember?"

"Yes, I remember. Hello, Hunter."

"You know Sybil, don't you? I'd forgotten."

"She has a women's society. For ladies engaged in commerce? We share information and advice. We had a meeting."

"I've heard about it, and I'm glad you have a friend like Sybil. Between her and Thumberton, perhaps they'll keep you in line, so you don't dig too deep a hole for yourself."

Hannah chuckled. "Your confidence in me remains overwhelming."

"How have you been?" he asked, his affection growing even more

blatant.

"I've been good. How about you?"

"I'm always grand. I'm busy and...busy."

"You're not *busy*," she scolded. "You're a rich, lazy wastrel, and you haven't told me why you're here."

"Sybil has a private card game starting in a bit. She invited me."

"She allows gambling at her house? I thought it was just at her club."

Hannah frowned with worry. She fretted over her association with Miss Jones, and she conveniently assumed that Miss Jones's corrupt activities didn't matter. The older woman was kind and had assisted Hannah in innumerable ways. Could Hannah be faulted for ignoring her dubious conduct?

It was a question that vexed her, and she never answered it to her satisfaction. So far, she'd simply overlooked the manner in which Miss Jones earned her vast fortune. Should she reconsider that position?

"Yes, a gambling party is starting," he said, "and don't glower at me about it." He rubbed a thumb on her forehead, as if he could wipe away her concern. "It's for low stakes, to pass the afternoon hours. My father is with me, and he and Sybil are chums, so it will be no more scandalous than the gathering you just had with her."

"You have the most interesting method of rationalizing your wicked antics."

"Well, I only have *wicked* antics, so there are no other antics for me to rationalize." He sighed as if he was delighted by her. "I've missed you. I almost stopped by your shop a hundred times, but I told myself to leave you alone."

"I will admit that, whenever a customer arrives, I've expected it to be you. You're such an annoying nuisance that I can't believe you stayed away."

"I can't figure out what sort of connection we're supposed to have."

"Neither can I."

"We're *destined* to be friends. Does that sound silly?"

"No. I feel a bizarre attachment to you."

"But I'm not exactly a man who can be friends with a female like you, so I shouldn't prolong the agony of our doomed acquaintance."

"It's not doomed. Don't think that."

“You didn’t want to be my wife, but how about my next mistress?”

Her jaw dropped, and she would have been insulted, but his eyes were dancing with mischief.

“I’m shocked you’d mention such a sordid topic in my presence,” she said. “What if I was the swooning type? I might have suffered a fit of the vapors and fallen unconscious at your feet.”

“Lucky for me that you’re made of sterner stuff.”

“I forgive you for trying to embarrass me with risqué conversation, but I can’t have you avoiding me for reasons that are too ridiculous to clarify. I insist you visit me when you are in my neighborhood.”

“You shouldn’t invite me. I’m a nuisance, remember? I’ll show up so frequently that you’ll never be able to complete any of your chores.”

“For you, I could probably put some of them aside.”

He gazed at her so fondly that, for a wild moment, it appeared he might kiss her, and she wished he would. After they’d been together in the country, she’d thought of naught else. It was particularly thrilling to be held by him, and it was a facet of amour that no one had ever explained to her.

It seemed as if he’d opened a secret door that only adults could peek through. She’d like to peek through that door again, but before he could proceed, a woman called to him from up on the verandah.

“Hunter! Come! The cards are being dealt, and they’re waiting for you.”

He was still clasping Hannah’s hands, and he casually released them and spun to the woman. “I’ll be there in a minute. I’m saying goodbye to someone.”

“Don’t dawdle. Your father is complaining, and I can’t abide him when he’s in a snit.”

The woman looked familiar, maybe even the tart who’d been snuggled with him in that dark parlor the night they’d met. Whoever she was, she had to be a doxy. Her bright blue gown was cut so low in the front that most of her bosom was exposed, and she wouldn’t dare lean forward.

She was very beautiful, tall and buxom, with lush red hair piled on her head. It was intricately styled with curls and braids, and a feather dangled in the back. Her chic comportment made Hannah feel dowdy, plain, and a tad unkempt, even though she wasn’t any of those things.

The woman studied Hunter possessively, cataloguing every detail of his proximity to Hannah, and Hannah received the distinct impression that the woman was furious to have stumbled on them.

She was precisely the sort of flamboyant goddess Hannah envisioned on his arm—when she allowed her mind to wander in that direction. She had no business pondering his trollops, yet here was one of them, and it forced Hannah to realize that she could never have wed him. She was too ordinary, and he'd have regretted it forever.

The woman tarried, as if Hunter would immediately abandon Hannah and join her. When he didn't, she grumbled a remark Hannah couldn't decipher, then she whipped away and went inside.

"I should go in too," he said.

"Yes, don't let me keep you. I was just leaving myself."

"How is your brother? Is he watching over you for me?"

"Yes, he's been a veritable guard dog on your behalf."

"How about Winston and Amelia? They haven't been bothering you, have they?"

"No. I never hear from them unless there's an emergency at the estate, and there are very few of those."

"I'm still at your service," he said. "If you ever need my assistance, be sure to summon me."

"I won't forget, but I can't imagine why I'd ever need you."

"You never know what might happen."

They should have departed, but they were frozen in place, the perfect moment stretching to infinity. One of them ought to have offered a profound comment, but she didn't think it should be her. What could she say anyway?

*I rejected your proposal of marriage, but could we reconsider?*

Hunter Stone was very proud, and she didn't suppose he gave second chances.

"I'm delighted to have bumped into you," he finally said. "I hadn't thought I ever would."

"I'm glad I bumped into you too."

"Take care of yourself."

"I always do."

"Liar." He laughed, his expression warm and fond. "You are a complete incompetent who is constantly balanced on the edge of

calamity.”

“I stand corrected.”

He drew away and walked to the verandah. He climbed the stairs to the door. At the last instant, he glanced back and waved, then he disappeared.

She remained where she was, the sparks settling. Then she continued to delay, anxious to be certain he was ensconced in a parlor and out of sight. If she ran into him, it would be too awkward.

Once she’d tamped down her raucous emotions, she walked to the verandah too, and she tiptoed through the house and directly out the front door. She’d have to trek for a bit until she reached an area where she could summon a hansom cab to convey her to her shop, but the lengthy stroll would be invigorating. It would furnish her with an opportunity to reflect.

She was a tad discombobulated—and sad too—from chatting with Hunter, but she would arrive home with a smile on her face, remembering that she was lucky and her life was very grand indeed.

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“Who were you talking to in the garden? I didn’t recognize her.”

Isabella posed the question casually, as if she wasn’t concerned about the petite beauty with whom Hunter had been flirting. But when he revealed the woman’s identity, she felt as if she’d been poked with a pin.

“It was Hannah Graves.”

“Hannah Graves, your *almost* fiancée?”

“The very one.”

Hunter’s reply was flippant and blasé, as if Miss Graves’s presence was irrelevant. He ignored Isabella and pulled up a chair at the table where his father and the other players were eager to begin their game.

Neville had heard his remark, and he said, “Miss Graves is here? Go fetch her, Hunter. I should sneak a peek at this paragon who’s enticed you.”

“I wasn’t enticed,” Hunter scathingly retorted, “and I won’t inflict you on her. She believes I’m charming, and I won’t dim her opinion by introducing her to any of my relatives.”

“She’d like me more than she likes you.” Neville’s comment made

his friends chortle and guffaw.

Isabella meandered around the table, filling glasses with liquor. When she grabbed for Hunter's, she said, "What did she want?"

"She wasn't here to see me. Sybil has started a society for industrious females. They were having a meeting."

"How is she industrious?" Neville asked.

"I told you: She owns a shop. She sells books."

Neville was aghast at the notion. "To customers?"

"No, to fish," Hunter snidely said. "Of course to customers."

"Is she successful?" Neville inquired.

"She's a female," Hunter said, "so I'm betting not."

"What is the name of her fine establishment?" Neville asked Hunter, and Isabella could have hugged him. She'd been desperate to ask that very question, but she didn't dare seem too curious.

"It's called *The First Page*."

"I've never heard of it," Neville said, but one of his friends piped in with, "I've purchased books there. It's a cozy little place."

Isabella eased away and set the decanter on the sideboard. Several of the men had brought their mistresses, and they were scattered on sofas. Isabella knew all of them, and normally, she'd have sat down and chatted, but she slipped out of the room and snuck to the verandah, being anxious to get another look at Miss Graves.

Hunter's fondness for the bloody girl had been so blatant that Isabella had clearly sensed it. She'd never seen him gaze at a woman as he'd been gazing at Miss Graves. He'd definitely never stared at Isabella like that, and suddenly, she was fretting about her future in a way she hadn't previously.

Hunter had affairs and one-night romps. He had a roving eye and was always captivated by a pretty face, but they were innocuous encounters that weren't important.

Isabella, in her role as his paramour, had to pretend she wasn't disturbed by his licentious habits and philandering, but evidently, Miss Graves was a different matter entirely.

He'd claimed he would remain a bachelor, but for reasons she couldn't clarify, she viewed Hannah Graves as a serious threat to her happiness.

If Hunter changed his mind about matrimony and bound himself to

the accursed ninny, Isabella expected that his affection for *her* would evaporate. Where would that leave her? Nowhere she wanted to be, that was for sure.

Though Isabella searched thoroughly, Miss Graves had vanished, the garden empty, and she went back to the parlor. She slid onto a sofa, with no one noticing she'd left. She feigned great interest in the wagers and conversation, but in reality, she was brimming with plans and schemes.

She and Miss Graves needed to have a long, frank talk, and it needed to happen sooner rather than later. Miss Graves had to go away—and stay away—and Isabella had to make her realize that it was the only available choice.

She had a nasty manner of dealing with Hunter's trollops, and she was very possessive. She'd chased off all sorts of slatterns who'd imagined they could glom onto him, but Isabella was standing by his side, and she wouldn't relinquish her spot to anyone.

Especially not Miss Hannah Graves—as she was about to learn in no uncertain terms.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Hannah was rearranging a shelf of books when the bell dinged over the door to indicate a customer had entered. She was alone. Her clerk was running errands, and Jackson was...

Well, Jackson was wherever he went in the day. They had frequent discussions about how it made her worry, but he was too accustomed to being on his own. Some rules were difficult for him to follow.

She wished the customer would be Hunter Stone, but she couldn't picture him rushing to visit her so soon after they'd chatted. She pasted on a smile and headed to the front to greet whoever had arrived, but when she saw who it was, she staggered to a halt.

It was the glamorous woman who'd called to Hunter from up on Miss Jones's verandah. She'd advised Hunter that the card game was starting, and the other players were waiting for him. Now, here she was—the very next afternoon—in Hannah's shop.

She was wearing another fabulous gown, green this time. It was cut low in the bodice, and it had black piping on the shoulders, cuffs, and sleeves. The color was augmented by a black fan, black parasol, and black lace shawl.

Her hair was intricately styled, with curls and braids, but much of it was covered by an elaborate bonnet. She was statuesque, but with the bonnet on, she appeared even taller. She loomed over Hannah, so Hannah felt tiny and in need of a stout defender.

"May I help you?" Hannah was determined to pretend she didn't recollect the woman, but to no avail.

"You remember me, Miss Graves. Don't act as if we're strangers."

"I don't believe we've met."

"I'm Miss Isabella Darling."

"Hello, Miss Darling."

The woman paused, bristling, as if the name was supposed to mean something. When Hannah showed no reaction, Miss Darling said, "I am Hunter's mistress."

Hannah was surprised she was able to maintain a bland expression.



She'd known Hunter consorted with slatterns, but she'd never imagined she might come face to face with one of them. It had suddenly become the most risqué moment of her rather tedious life.

"If that's even remotely true," Hannah said, "then you are a doxy, while I am a respectable gentlewoman. I shouldn't have to be polite, and I'm very busy this morning. If you'll excuse me?"

She stomped over to the door and yanked it open, gesturing outside, so Miss Darling wouldn't be confused about what Hannah wanted. But the trollop didn't oblige her and slink out.

She surveyed her surroundings and sneered with derision, apprising Hannah that she wasn't impressed. If Hannah had admired her at all, the scorn might have hurt her feelings, but she wasn't acquainted with Miss Darling, and there was no reason to admire her. Her mockery floated away like a cloud in the wind.

"Hunter told me about this pathetic little enterprise," Miss Darling said. "He's vastly amused that you're engaged in commerce, and he's certain you'll fail at it."

"Yes, I've heard his opinion, and I have an opinion to match it. I think he's a pompous idiot. Will that be all?"

Miss Darling smirked. "You *don't* think that about him. I watched you talking to him, and it's obvious you're besotted."

"If that's what you deduced from it, then you are a tad deranged."

Miss Darling wandered over to a shelf, and she studied the books. Hannah was positive she wasn't really reading them. She was simply stalling, working hard to rattle Hannah, and she was succeeding.

"He traveled to the country to betroth himself to your sister," Miss Darling said.

"I'm aware of that fact."

"He mistakenly assumed you were the bride who had been offered."

"I was there for the whole embarrassing episode, so yes, I'm aware of that too."

"The debacle was so horrid that he's decided he won't marry. He ordered his father to forget about a future betrothal. He won't allow one."

"He's not serious," Hannah said. "He has a title to protect, and there are plenty of debutantes who would love to snag him."

"I don't care about any debutantes. I care about you, Miss Graves."

It's clear to me that you hope he'll ultimately wed you."

Hannah's cheeks heated. She'd been wondering if it could still occur, but it was a pipedream. Hunter had proposed, and she'd declined. What else was there to say about it?

"I don't ever wish to wed," she firmly stated. "In my view, men are fools and wastrels. I would never let a man boss me or spend my money. I'm contrary that way."

Miss Darling assessed Hannah with what was probably pity. "I can understand your fondness for Hunter. He's rich, handsome, and generous." Miss Darling waved a hand over her stunning outfit. "He's definitely been generous with me, so I'm not here to judge you. I completely comprehend your interest."

"I have no idea how to counter your misconception, but I shouldn't have to counter it. You need to depart."

The annoying shrew still didn't comply. She glared with exasperation, as if Hannah wasn't behaving as she'd planned.

"I've been with Hunter for years," Miss Darling said, "and he's very devoted to me."

"Well, good for you."

"I've learned his faults and habits, and I thought you should learn about some of them too. It's thrilling for a girl like you to consider marriage to a man like him, but I can guarantee that it wouldn't turn out as you're expecting."

Hannah sighed. "I won't discuss him with you, and I won't listen to you disparaging him. You are presuming on my cordial nature."

"I'm not disparaging him. I'm simply telling you a few truths. Have you met his father?" Miss Darling clucked her tongue. "No, I don't think you have."

"I've never had the pleasure."

"The male members of the Stone family are renowned for their debauchery. His father is the worst of the lot, and his sons take after him. There is no antic they won't pursue, no sin they won't commit, and no female they won't seduce."

"That's enough, Miss Darling! It appears that I've stoked a jealousy in you, but it's silly for you to fret about me, and you needn't warn me away. You can have him—with my blessing. I would never attach myself to someone so depraved."

“Liar. If he proposed, I’m convinced you would leap at the chance.”

“I can’t persuade you of my intentions, so I will quit trying.”

“I’m determined that you should recognize the sort of scoundrel he is. I’m sure you don’t fully grasp the situation.”

“You’re wrong. He was very blunt in informing me he was awful.”

“He would have laughed and insisted he couldn’t help himself, that he’s always been wicked. It’s one of his methods of flirtation.”

Hannah gnawed on her cheek, remembering how Hunter’s eyes gleamed with mischief when he bragged about his faults. If it had been a ruse to charm her, it had succeeded. She’d decided he was wonderful—despite his self-deprecation.

“Fine, Miss Darling,” she said. “He’s just as bad as he claims, and apparently, you have a point to make. Would you get to it? This entire conversation is very distasteful, and I’d like it to conclude as rapidly as we can manage.”

“I’d be delighted to hurry this along. Hunter is easily bored. He always has a mistress, but this very moment, he’s hunting for a second one. One paramour is not enough for him.”

“Miss Darling! Please! Have mercy on me!”

“He likes me because I tolerate his proclivities, but even so, he likes variety. Every so often, he takes up with a second girl, usually one who is much younger and much more naïve than me. He likes the virginal aspect of it.”

“That’s it! You may leave or *I* will leave, and you can dawdle in here by yourself. What’s it to be?”

“I’m almost finished.” Miss Darling grinned like the cat that had eaten the canary. “If you agree to be his bride, he will keep on with me *and* continue with his search for a backup mistress. He’s been holding interviews to find the perfect candidate.”

“He interviews them?” Hannah said, before she could bite down the question.

“Yes, and there is a slew of naughty tarts who’ve applied for the position. Could you put up with a husband like that? I realize a wife is supposed to look the other way, but you don’t seem the type who would.”

Hannah was embarrassed and disgusted, and for some reason, she was about to burst into tears. “I’ve heard you loud and clear, ma’am.

Viscount Marston is a wretch and a libertine. He's much more horrid than I ever imagined. I believe you. Now go away!"

But Miss Darling wouldn't shut up. "As for myself, I revel in that kind of corrupt behavior. My world is in the demimonde where he thrives, and if he wants to dabble with other slatterns, it doesn't bother me. He returns to me once he grows weary of the chase, and I eagerly welcome him back."

Evidently, Miss Darling expected a histrionic response, but Hannah was very calm. "I'm *not* interested in Viscount Marston. How many times must I repeat myself?"

Miss Darling sauntered over, and she towered over Hannah.

"If Hunter comes sniffing around," Miss Darling said, "you'd better remember what I've told you. You are *not* to encourage him."

"I have no plans to encourage him. I swear. Are we done?"

Miss Darling snorted. "I guess we are. I can't have you in my life, Miss Graves. It's annoying to me, so you must stay away."

"I will. I promise."

To Hannah's great relief, Jackson strolled in the door. It was still open from when Hannah had tried to shoo Miss Darling out of it. He was such an astute person, and he instantly catalogued the odd scene: two women standing much too close together, their postures angry, the taller one appearing quite threatening.

"Is this a new customer?" he asked Hannah, and he blocked her from Miss Darling's view in a protective manner.

Hannah was always amazed by how much power a male wielded in comparison to a female. He was a boy who hadn't yet shot up in height, but he had their father's ability to exert command and control. Miss Darling immediately stepped away from Hannah.

"This is Isabella Darling," Hannah furiously apprised him. "She is Viscount Marston's mistress, which neither you nor I should have had to learn, but she's inflicted herself on me, so now, we're both aware of her sordid reputation."

Jackson bristled and glared at Miss Darling. "Miss Graves shouldn't have to be insulted by your base presence. May I escort you out to your carriage?"

The impertinent rascal flashed such a vitriolic glower that Miss Darling was cowed by it. She shook her fancy bonnet, straightened her

shoulders, and marched out. Jackson shut the door behind her and spun the key in the lock.

They tiptoed to the window and peeked out the curtain, observing as the nasty shrew climbed into her coach. It was a grand vehicle, pulled by four white horses, providing further proof that Hunter spent extravagantly to keep her in lavish style.

The realization was repulsive and disturbing. Hannah liked Hunter Stone so much, and obviously, she'd imbued him with character traits he didn't possess. How dare Miss Darling strut into Hannah's shop! What gall!

Once the vehicle rolled away, she staggered over to a chair and eased down. She stared up at Jackson and blew out a heavy breath.

"You always show up at just the right time," she said.

"I have a second sense about you. I can tell when you're about to get yourself in trouble."

"It wasn't *me* getting myself into any trouble. The offensive vixen simply waltzed in, bold as brass."

"I won't leave you alone in the future," he said.

"I wasn't in any danger from her. I'm merely flabbergasted that she was brazen enough to harass me."

"You shouldn't have had to talk to her, and I could ensure she doesn't visit you again. Shall I?"

There was a steely tone in his voice that was alarming. Usually, he seemed like a pleasant, normal boy, but he'd had an upbringing she couldn't imagine and that he refused to describe.

What sort of retaliation was he envisioning? She was too terrified to find out.

"I don't need you to scare her off," she said. "Though it sounds bizarre, she's convinced Viscount Marston is sweet on me."

"He is." Jackson nodded as if it was a universal truth.

"He's *not* sweet on me, but she presumes he is. She's jealous about it, which is ridiculous. As if I could steal him away from a flamboyant trollop like her!"

"I've been surrounded by women like her all my life. My mother was a lot like her."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"They're used to fighting for scraps, so they often carry on like rabid

dogs. They have to be dealt with appropriately, so they don't feel free to bite."

"I'm not worried about Miss Darling, and I'm definitely not afraid of her, but she rattled me. It's what she was hoping to accomplish, so she won't bother us again."

"You're the adult, so I'll have to assume you're correct. But in case you're wrong, I'll keep a better eye on you. I promised Viscount Marston I would, and I'd hate to have him think I was slacking in my duty."

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"What now?"

"How should I know? You're much smarter than me, and you'll devise a suitable plan."

Winston glared at Amelia, and he'd like to stomp over and shake her. The money he'd borrowed was coming due, the interest escalating at a frightening rate, pushing the amount higher by the day.

One of the ruffians who'd offered the loans had stopped by the prior afternoon, and he'd threatened to break Winston's legs if he was late. Every minute that ticked by, Winston quailed and peeked over his shoulder, certain he was being watched, that his tormenters had spies behind every bush.

"You are no help to me at all," he told Amelia. "I am wading through my darkest hour, and you're completely unconcerned."

"I fear for you, but what can I do? You spent my inheritance, so I don't believe any of this is my fault, and I have no advice as to how you can fix the problem."

"Don't blame me for our bank account being empty."

They were in her boudoir, and she was seated on a chair, while he paced in front of her. He might have been a headmaster chastising a student. She was dreadfully slow in her mental abilities, and ludicrously devoted to him, so it was simple to coerce her.

"I've tried to be a good wife," she said.

"Have you? If you'd been a *good* wife, Parkhurst would be mine. I wouldn't have to be scrounging for pennies and praying for a miracle."

A housemaid knocked and poked her nose in to announce, "Mr. Nate Carew has arrived. He visited recently, with Viscount Marston?"

“Dammit,” Winston muttered. “We can’t fuss with him.”

The housemaid stiffened, and Amelia hastily smoothed over his crude remark. “Please tell Mr. Carew it’s lovely he’s called on us, and I’ll be down shortly.”

“He brought luggage,” the girl said, “so he must be expecting to stay. I thought I should warn you.”

Amelia forced a smile. “It’s nice to have company.”

The girl slunk off, and they froze, waiting until her footsteps had faded down the hall.

“The irksome dolt is snuffling around Rebecca,” Winston said. “He learned about her dowry, and he’s hoping to ingratiate himself. If you’re not careful, you’ll end up with that cretin as your son-in-law.”

“He’s Viscount Marston’s best friend, so he’s a gentleman. He wouldn’t behave badly.”

“I gravely despair when you babble comments like that. You must talk with Rebecca and explain his purpose. She can’t let him drag her off into any secluded parlors.”

“You’re being silly,” Amelia said. “He’s returned because I’m a delightful hostess, and he enjoyed Parkhurst. He told me so. He grew up in London, and he likes to tarry in the country. When he was here previously, he hardly spoke to Rebecca. She wouldn’t have had the opportunity to entice him.”

“You are so gullible.”

His temper flared, and he began pacing again.

He had several irons in the fire that could deliver quick funds. The first infusion would be provided by Hannah, and she would suffer the consequences very soon. He hadn’t been eager to implement his scheme, but after Viscount Marston had attacked him—and Hannah had laughed and egged him on—the gloves were off.

He would deal with her, then he needed to get Rebecca’s signature on a transfer of deed for Parkhurst. Once he owned it, he could sell his share. Hannah had insisted the old prick, Attorney Thumberton, would have to authorize any changes, but that was because Thumberton was trustee of Sir Edmund’s estate.

With Rebecca being viewed as Sir Edmund’s daughter, Winston had no legal claim to serve as her guardian or to take over her dowry. But if he was her father, if Sir Edmund wasn’t...

Well, that created a whole new scenario he could manipulate to his advantage.

"I've made a decision," he said.

"What is it?"

"It's time to mend the situation regarding Rebecca's parentage."

Amelia frowned. "Meaning what?"

"We've allowed the lie to fester for too long. The world assumes Sir Edmund is her father. It's left me in the hideous position of not being able to manage my own child's life."

"I don't see why we should reveal it. Isn't it much too late?"

"We've debated this repeatedly. *I* should be in charge of her, so we must declare that she's mine—rather than Sir Edmund's."

"Then *I* would have to admit I had committed adultery. And the end result would be that Rebecca wasn't recognized as Sir Edmund's daughter. Wouldn't she be a bastard then? How is that a benefit to her—or to me?"

"The only other option is that I fail to pay my debt, and I'm killed by my creditors. Is that what you want?"

"No!"

"It sounds as if you've put Rebecca ahead of me in your affections. How am I to assess such blatant disrespect?"

Her cheeks heated, and she glanced down at her hands. She was thoroughly cowed, which he liked to observe.

He should probably evaluate the circumstances a little more closely, but he couldn't move beyond the fact that—if he was officially named as Rebecca's father—he could wrestle her assets away from Thumberton. There was no court in the land that would deny a father the right to supervise his daughter.

Winston constantly envisioned all the idle money sitting in Rebecca's trust fund. It was like a lump of clay that, currently, was useless and unexploited. If he could glom onto it, he could mold it so it became valuable.

"We're finished discussing this. For now," he told her. "Go down and greet your guest."

She pushed herself to her feet. "I'm sorry I upset you."

"I no longer believe that to be true. You upset me so frequently that I've started to think you enjoy it." She reached for him, as if she'd hug



him in apology, and he stepped away and glowered at her. "Leave me be."

He whirled away, showing her his back. He could see her reflection in the mirror over her dressing table. She dawdled anxiously, knowing he'd be angry for hours, for days, so she'd ponder and stew, and ultimately—in order to get him to forgive her—she'd behave precisely as he was demanding.

She sighed and walked out, and he grinned from ear to ear.

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Rebecca hurried toward her mother's boudoir. Mr. Carew had arrived, and she was unnerved by the news. He supposed he could flirt with her, but secretly. Her mother wouldn't like it, and Rebecca didn't like him flirting.

Her mother could be very naïve too. What if she gave Rebecca to Mr. Carew?

She had to talk to her mother about her reservations, and she hoped her mother would actually listen for once.

As she tiptoed down the hall, a maid exited the room, and the door was ajar. Rebecca could hear her mother and Winston arguing. Suddenly, she was the topic of their conversation. In light of how near she was, she couldn't help but eavesdrop.

*I should be in charge of her, so we must declare that she's mine—rather than Sir Edmund's.*

At Winston's remark, Rebecca was so astonished that she clapped a palm over her mouth, so she wouldn't gasp aloud. The rumor circulated in the neighborhood, but Rebecca ignored it. Was Winston serious? Could it be?

She was certain her mother would vehemently refute Winston's assertion, but to Rebecca's horror, she confirmed it.

*Then I would have to admit I had committed adultery. And the end result would be that Rebecca wasn't recognized as Sir Edmund's daughter. Wouldn't she be a bastard then?*

Alarmed by the discovery, she staggered away, her mind racing.

She wasn't Rebecca Graves? She was Winston's daughter? She was Rebecca Webster? She felt as if she'd been standing on a cliff, and it had given way beneath her. She was falling and falling. Where would she be

when she landed at the bottom?

She wasn't sure where she was going. She rushed blindly down the stairs, and when she rounded a corner, she physically bumped into Mr. Carew. They collided so forcefully that she bounced off him and almost collapsed onto the rug.

"Miss Rebecca!" he said, as he leapt to steady her. "My goodness! What's wrong? You're running as if the house is on fire."

"Oh, oh, hello, Mr. Carew. I've had a bit of a shock. I just need to sit down for a moment, then I'll be fine."

They were next to an empty parlor, and he urged her in and guided her to the sofa. There was a liquor tray on a table, and he poured a glass and brought it over to her.

"Have a sip," he said.

She sniffed it and wrinkled her nose. "My mother doesn't allow me to imbibe of hard spirits."

"Well, dear, your mother isn't here, and you look so distressed that I'm afraid you might faint on me. Drink up. It will calm you very fast."

She took the glass from him and tried a small taste. It was very strong, and it stung in her nostrils.

"Have some more," he said. "Swallow down as much as you can."

She obeyed him until she'd finished it, and he'd been correct that it would have a swift effect. Her pounding pulse immediately slowed to a more normal rhythm.

He nestled down beside her, and he was very close, their arms and thighs pressed together in a manner she didn't like. Ordinarily, she would have shifted to put some space between them, but just then, he seemed very grown up, very responsible and kind. He clasped her hand, and they tarried in the silence.

"What happened?" he asked after awhile. "Can you tell me?"

She would never tell anyone what Winston had said, but she liked that Mr. Carew was so concerned. "My mother and Winston were quarreling over me."

"Of course they were. When I last visited, they denigrated you constantly. It was awful conduct on their part." He clucked his tongue with offense and pity. "They don't care about you, Rebecca."

"I've always been a great trial, especially to Winston."

"I realize your mother claims she'd like to wed you to an aristocrat,

but she and Winston are simply eager to be shed of you as quickly as they can. They insist they've supported you long enough. They mentioned it in my presence, plain as day."

She must have looked particularly glum because Mr. Carew continued, apparently assuming more words would improve matters.

"I'm worried your mother will marry you to the first wretch who agrees to have you. She might select an old man or a drunkard or a philanderer. Why, she might even offer you to a violent fiend."

"You mean he might beat me?"

"Yes, there are many brutes who regularly beat their wives. Could you bear it?"

"No, I couldn't."

"And you being such a sweet gem of a girl," he said. "You don't deserve such an appalling fate. If only I could save you from it. I would, you know—if you'd let me."

He was gazing at her as if he truly liked her, as if she was very precious and unique. It softened her feelings toward him.

Previously, she'd viewed him as a fortune-hunter, and Jackson had warned her to be cautious around him, but she couldn't remain at Parkhurst now. She yearned to confide what she'd learned, but she was too ashamed. Her entire life, she'd believed herself to be Sir Edmund's daughter, but that history was a lie.

She'd been conceived in an adulterous affair. Did it make Rebecca a bastard? Was that her status? She couldn't imagine, and there was no one she could ask. How could she ever reveal such a repugnant secret?

She'd like to run away to London and inform Hannah of what had occurred, but she'd be too mortified to confess the facts. She'd always adored and admired Hannah, but it appeared she wasn't Hannah's sister. What if she admitted the dilemma, and Hannah laughed and cast her aside? Then what?

"I could take you away from here," Mr. Carew murmured. "I could take you away from *them*. I could hide you, so they could never hurt you again."

On hearing his wily comment, she understood how Eve must have felt in the Garden of Eden when the snake was tempting her. It sounded like a perfect idea. Winston chided her for being dimwitted, for never considering the ramifications of her actions. What if she left with Mr.

Carew?

She was too confused to answer that question.

Footsteps echoed out in the hall, which was a huge relief. A housemaid passed by the open door, and when she saw Rebecca with Mr. Carew, she stopped and said, "Mr. Carew, there you are. Mrs. Webster is in the front parlor, and refreshments are being served. Will you come?"

Mr. Carew was still holding Rebecca's hand. He squeezed her fingers, then released her and rose to his feet. "I'm delighted that Mrs. Webster will receive me, and after my lengthy ride, I'm famished. A refreshment would be lovely." He peered down at Rebecca and said, "Will you come too?"

"I'll join you in a bit," she replied. "I have to fetch something from the solarium."

Exasperation crossed his face, but with the maid hovering, he couldn't chastise her. He walked out, the maid following him. At the last second, she frowned at Rebecca, as if scolding her for being alone with him.

Well, Rebecca knew she shouldn't have been! But her whole world had been smashed to pieces. How could she be expected to think clearly about any situation?

She waited a minute, then a minute more, to be sure he'd departed, then she dashed off in the other direction. She locked herself in her bedchamber, and when a maid knocked, she claimed she had a sick headache and wouldn't be down to supper. She asked that a tray be sent up instead, then she closed and locked her door again.

She wondered if Mr. Carew would spend the night at Parkhurst. She wondered what her mother's opinion had been of her staying in her room. Had she even noticed? Wasn't she concerned? Why hadn't she visited to check on Rebecca's condition?

No one had ever cared about her, and she'd discovered why. She wasn't Sir Edmund's child. She wasn't anybody really. How would she ever accept that realization?

Late in the evening, when she was in bed and sleeping quite deeply, she thought someone turned the knob on her door and tried to enter her room, but she was certain it had been a dream.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hannah was marching down a busy London street. She'd been running errands and was returning home. Her basket was heavy and rubbing a blister on her palm. Business had been especially slow, so she was feeling morose and exhausted. Her head was down, and she was lost in thought.

Suddenly, a man's boots were visible, and she'd been so distracted that she'd nearly crashed into him. She pulled up short and mumbled, "Pardon me."

"Miss Graves! We meet again."

She yanked her gaze up to find Hunter Stone standing in her way. She grinned with delight. He grinned too.

"Viscount Marston!"

"Why are you strutting around London by yourself? Don't you have a maid to stagger after you?"

"This will come as a shock, but I'm not a fussy debutante. I don't need a chaperone when I'm out and about."

"I don't suppose you can afford a maid either."

"Well...ah...no, I can't."

"I'm absolutely devastated to hear it. I hate that your circumstances have been reduced to such a pitiful level."

She scoffed. "My circumstances are fine, and I'm proficient at taking care of myself." It was such a huge lie that she was surprised she wasn't struck by lightning.

He chuckled, but with derision. "You are not proficient by any standard. In my opinion, you are a complete incompetent."

"Is there some reason you insult me whenever we chat?"

"I'm not insulting you, Miss Graves. I'm furnishing you with wise advice, from an older, shrewder male. You should accept it with good grace."

"You are a lazy scoundrel, and it's a mystery to me why you'd presume you have any guidance worth heeding. Why would I listen to you?"

“You should *listen* because I’m a man, that’s why.”

“You are too ridiculous for words. Are you following me?”

“No. I was simply driving by and observed you as you were stomping along. I waved, but you didn’t see me.”

He gestured to his carriage that was parked down the block. It was rudely obstructing the flow of traffic so other vehicles had to maneuver around it.

“Are you headed to your shop?” he asked. “Will you allow me to give you a ride?”

She would love to have him whisk her away. Her basket was weighty, her burdens too, and she enjoyed his company so much, but she couldn’t stop thinking about Miss Darling.

The horrid shrew had vividly reminded Hannah that she shouldn’t be cordial with him. Not because Miss Darling had warned her away, but because of how wicked he was. She was reconsidering her acquaintance with Sybil Jones too.

Miss Jones and Viscount Marston brought fun and interesting changes to her life. They were wealthy and sophisticated, and they reveled on the fringes of the world where Hannah had resided before Winston and Amelia had chased her away from Parkhurst.

She was lonely and overwhelmed, but that was no excuse for bad choices. She knew better than to associate with them, but they’d been kind and helpful. When Hannah maintained a connection to them, she dragged herself down in a fashion that she recognized to be wrong and improper.

“I probably shouldn’t,” she said.

“Don’t be absurd. You’re coming with me. We’re not arguing about it.”

“I’m not an invalid. I can walk the rest of the way.”

“Of course you can, but you don’t have to. You will permit me to ease your day a bit.”

He took her basket, imperiously slipping it from her hand to his own, then he swept his arm theatrically, indicating she should proceed to his vehicle. An outrider had been watching them, and he whipped the door open, ready to assist her as she climbed in.

It would be churlish to refuse, and she was also quite sure Viscount Marston wouldn’t let her decline. If she tried, he’d pick her up and carry

her over bodily.

“You can bully me just this once,” she said, “but don’t get used to it.”

“Am I bullying you? I thought I was practicing my manners.”

“I’m always glad to bump into you, but I can’t figure out why.”

“You’re wild about me.”

“In your dreams maybe.”

He smiled a delicious smile, and she realized why a doxy like Miss Darling would feel so possessive about him. Any woman who latched onto him would have a hard time releasing him. Hannah, herself, was regretting that she couldn’t hold onto him, and he’d never been hers in the first place.

The outrider lifted her into the carriage. Viscount Marston gave directions to his driver, then he climbed in too. He set the basket on the floor, then slid onto the seat across from her.

They tarried in silence, staring, waiting for the horses to pull them away. There was such a sense of expectation in the air, as if something amazing was supposed to happen. She couldn’t imagine what he was thinking, but as to herself, she was terrified she was about to babble a stream of comments that would embarrass her forever.

“I’ve missed you,” he said, as if he’d yanked the words out of her mouth.

The admission thrilled her. “Don’t tell me that. It makes me like you.”

“Haven’t I mentioned this previously? You should like me.” He patted his thigh. “You’re much too far away, and I insist you sit on my lap.”

“It sounds incredibly risqué, so I shall stay right where I am.”

He ignored her and leaned forward. In a quick, fluid move, he hauled her over and nestled her down. She was on her knees, her thighs spread, her skirt stretched so tight the seams were about to rip.

He swiftly grasped how her clothing had failed to cooperate, and he tugged at the hem, baring a bit of her calves, her stockings visible. The ease with which he arranged her had her assuming he often traveled around the city with females snuggled on his lap.

She should have been incensed, but she couldn’t muster any outrage. She was too happy and wouldn’t castigate herself over what was

occurring.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” he said.

Before she could reply, he drew her to him and kissed her. She participated with great relish. Fate was determined they fraternize, yet why would she have a destiny with him? They were different people who led completely different lives.

The embrace continued for an eternity, going on and on until she was plunged into a puddle of lush desire. His tongue was in her mouth, his curious palms roaming over her torso.

She never pinned up her hair; it was too difficult without a maid. She simply tied it with a ribbon, and he’d jerked the ribbon free, so he could ruffle his fingers in the soft strands. It felt so riveting that it had to be a sin.

She was beginning to understand why females got themselves into so much trouble with cads. Throughout her life, there had been stories about girls who were ruined by scoundrels. She’d never been able to fathom why a girl would succumb, and she’d told herself that *she* had a stronger character, that if a rogue ever started flirting with her, she’d send him packing.

But she’d fallen into that exact sort of romantic trap. She was secluded in a dark carriage, the curtains closed, and she was delighted by her predicament. She warned herself to stop what she was doing, to remember herself, but when would she ever have a chance like this again?

She’d bumped into him by accident, and it seemed to be the only way they would ever cross paths. If she could receive a few kisses in the process, ones that she would fondly recollect, how could that be wrong?

Eventually, they rattled to a halt, and they might have been driving for hours, but she’d been too distracted to notice. He must have had his driver slow down and take the scenic route. He was just that type of manipulative scalawag.

Their lips parted, and she sighed with pleasure. He sighed too. She was still sprawled on his lap, laying on his chest, and he’d mesmerized her to the point that her limbs were paralyzed.

She needed to slide away, to straighten her hair and clothes, so when his outrider opened the door, she wouldn’t provide any hint of how she’d been misbehaving. The door didn’t open though, leaving her to



suspect, once again, that she wasn't the first young lady who'd dallied with him in his coach.

He probably had a secret signal to let his servants know when it would be all right to intrude.

"Since I keep running into you like this," he said, his tone warm, his gaze enchanting, "I've decided it's not a coincidence."

"Is it your habit to meander through London in the afternoon, kissing any ninny who is foolish enough to climb into a carriage with you?"

"I won't answer you except to say that any girl who dared would have to be very, very pretty."

It was a sweet compliment, and it washed over her like cool rain. "Does flattery work to get you what you want from women?"

"Yes, always." He grinned his wicked grin. "It's worked on you, hasn't it?"

She smirked. "I thought, if a man ever tried to seduce me, I wouldn't fall for it. Why are you so good at it?"

"I've had tons of practice."

"Ooh, you are horrid! You're not supposed to brag about being a scoundrel!"

"I *am* horrid. I never deny it."

"Have we arrived?" she asked.

"I expect so."

"I should head inside."

But she didn't move. Neither did he. They simply stared and smiled.

Finally, he said, "Could I spend an evening with you? What would you think of that? Could I escort you to the theater? Or I'm hosting a supper next week. If I invited you, would you come? My father will be there, and he's quite fascinating. If you met him, it would give you some idea of why I'm such a wretch."

She chuckled. "You're not that bad. You like to pretend you are, but you're not."

"You are the only one who believes I'm wonderful, and I shall tell myself I am—merely because you've proclaimed it. Come to my party," he said. "Be my special guest."

She froze, her mind awl over what her response should be.

She wasn't a debutante who needed her mother to review her social

engagements, and she liked to attend parties. Anymore, her world was so small, and she rarely encountered anyone who would bother to include her in a soiree.

She figured it would be intriguing to see his home, to be introduced to his father, but would Miss Darling be there? Or if not her, would other disreputable characters be present?

London was a huge city, but in certain circles, it was more tight-knit than a rural village. Her customers occasionally recognized her as Sir Edmund's daughter, and they assumed she'd been beggared after his death. They didn't realize she was in town because she chose to be.

They frequented her shop, and sent her other customers, because they were sorry for her, but if she started openly mingling with doxies and gamblers, what would people's opinion be then?

She was risking a lot by living alone. If she exacerbated the rumors, stories would spread that *she* had become a doxy too.

"I just can't," she said, feeling more despondent than was warranted.

"Why can't you? Are you descended from Puritans? Do you have priggish attitudes? You'll never convince me of it."

"I'm on my own, and I support myself, so I'm already considered very odd. I can't consciously aggravate my situation."

"My family members have been aristocrats for centuries. My father is Earl of Swindon now, and I will be earl after him. It's not as if I'm asking you to visit a den of iniquity. I actually have some very nice, very posh friends. You'd fit right in, and it would be good for you."

"Tell me this. Would Isabella Darling be there and serving as your hostess?"

He scowled so hard she was surprised his face didn't crack. "Why on earth would you mention Miss Darling to me?"

"I simply heard some gossip about you I shouldn't have heard."

"Who was gossiping?"

"It doesn't matter."

He scoffed. "It matters to me."

She ignored the comment and said instead, "I would be thrilled to join you in your box at the theater or sit by your father at your supper table, but you have an entire facet of your existence that is very risqué, and it would be hazardous for me to tiptoe out onto the edges of it."

A muscle ticked in his cheek. "I will admit to having various levels

of acquaintances, but they don't intersect. I'm adept at keeping them separate."

"But you always have a mistress."

She was stunned to have raised such a sordid topic, but Miss Darling's audacity had left Hannah furious and curious. Furious, because the woman had such gall. Curious, because his world was so different from hers. She constantly tried to be decent and upstanding, while he constantly tried to be indecent and corrupt.

"Yes, I always have a mistress," he ultimately confessed.

"Is it currently Miss Darling?" He shrugged, but didn't reply, and she asked, "Are you in love with her?"

He sputtered with amusement. "No, definitely not."

"Then why consort with her?"

He bristled with irritation. "Could we not continue this discussion? There are many ways in which I am despicable, but you needn't worry about what they are. Nor should I describe them to you. It's not appropriate, not by any standard."

"Are you interviewing for a second mistress too? Will you have two at the same time? It's what I was told."

He coughed out an embarrassed breath. "Who have you been talking to? I demand to be apprised."

"I notice you haven't answered my question. Are you holding interviews? Will you dally with Miss Darling, but have another doxy on the side? I don't know how these things are arranged, but that seems quite debauched to me. Isn't one enough for you?"

She didn't like how he was glaring at her. He was exasperated that she'd had the nerve to interrogate him about his bad habits. She was sure no one ever had. He was a nobleman's son, and it was an established rule that they could act however they pleased. In fact, depraved conduct was practically expected.

No doubt he was so immersed in his dissipation that he wasn't aware of how an ordinary person—*her* for instance—might view his wicked antics.

"I'm not searching for a second mistress," he said, "and I don't hold interviews. And as to Miss Darling, she and I have been friendly for a lengthy period, but we're about to part."

Hannah wondered if he'd shared that news with Miss Darling. The

imperious shrew wouldn't take it very graciously.

"Why are you parting with her?"

"We're not that compatible and that's all I'll say about it."

She studied his eyes, not liking the spark of temper she observed there, and she rested a palm on his cheek. "Don't be angry with me."

"I'm not angry," he claimed. "I'm mortified. I forget how awful I can be, and I can't defend myself to someone like you."

"I hope this explains why I can't accept any invitations from you. When I run into you, it's so joyous, and it seems as if we're destined to be together, but I could never fit in your life."

"I suppose not," he glumly concurred.

"I mean, do you cohabitate with Miss Darling? Is she living in your home and strutting about as if she's your wife? I'm confused by that scenario. It sounds morally bankrupt to me."

"Miss Darling and I don't cohabitate."

"She has her own lodging? That you pay for? Has she been worth the expense?"

He snickered and shook his head. "No, I can categorically state that she hasn't been worth it."

Hannah slid onto the other seat. She straightened her hair, and she smoothed a hand down her skirt to guarantee she was suitably covered.

"If you pass me on the street in the future," she said, "please don't stop and offer me a ride."

"All right, I shall refuse to be courteous."

"I wish you'd think about giving up your trollops. You'll be an earl someday. You should start setting an example."

"There's no chance of that. I've never understood the point of decent behavior."

"And *I* always try to behave in a stellar manner."

He chuckled. "I have more fun than you."

"I'm certain that's true."

Apparently, their conversation had wound to an end, and she was bereft at realizing it. She didn't note him flashing a signal to his servants, but an outrider opened the door, so she had to climb out. With the moment having arrived, she panicked.

Would she really never see Hunter Stone again? Is that what she wanted?

She yearned to apologize for being so blunt, yearned to insist she hadn't been serious, but that would be insane. He was so fabulously amazing, like a comet streaking across the sky and lighting up her world. He'd flirted with her, and she'd reveled in it, but she had to be content with having no more of him than that.

"We're always saying goodbye," she told him.

"But then we meet again."

"I expect Fate will get tired of fussing with us. Some other deranged couple will be thrown together, and we'll be free of this odd pull that connects us."

"Are you sure we should be free of it?"

"No, but I'm telling myself it's for the best."

He clasped her hand and kissed it. When he drew away, he was smiling at her so fondly. Then, as if a candle had been blown out, his dear expression was carefully masked. He grabbed her basket and lifted it out to his outrider who put it on the ground.

She didn't move, and Hunter raised a brow, clearly indicating that she'd been dismissed. She turned to the outrider, and he helped her down. He picked up her basket and said, "Would you like me to carry it in for you?"

"No, I'm fine. I can manage."

He shut the carriage door and leapt into the box to sit next to the driver. In a matter of seconds, the vehicle rolled away. The curtains were closed, so she didn't have a final glimpse of Hunter. She thought he might peek out to wave, but he didn't.

She stared until he vanished around the corner, and she had to physically restrain herself so she didn't run after him and claim she hadn't meant any of it.

What was wrong with her?

She went inside, the bell jangling as she entered. Jackson was seated on a chair behind the counter, loafing, as if he'd been waiting for her.

"Whose coach was that?" he asked. "It looked like Viscount Marston's crest."

She could have lied, but why would she? "Yes, he passed me while I was walking home, and he gave me a ride."

"You were gone for so long. I was beginning to think you weren't coming back."

“He and I were...ah...chatting, so I was delayed.”

His tone was much too casual for her liking, as if she was being interrogated by a suspicious parent. She wasn’t adept at prevarication, and she couldn’t hold his gaze.

“Your gown is crooked,” he said, “and your hair is mussed.”

“Oh.” She peered down, frantically searching her clothes for what was out of order, but she couldn’t find anything.

“I was joking.” He pushed himself to his feet and gestured to the basket. “Shall I take it up to the apartment for you?”

“No, I’ll do it. I have a headache, and I might nap for a bit. Would you watch the shop for me?”

“Yes, of course.”

She trudged toward the rear of the building, where there were stairs that led up to their apartment.

“I like Viscount Marston,” Jackson said. “I wouldn’t want you to suppose I don’t.”

She stopped and glanced back. “I like him too.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily imagine he has your best interests at heart though.”

“I know that, and despite what you presume, he’s been a complete gentleman with me.”

“Has he?”

Jackson was much too mature for being just fourteen. He flashed such a skeptical glower that she felt like a total fraud.

“I’m a sensible adult,” she said, “and I’m perfectly capable of deciding whether or not to have a male acquaintance.”

“He isn’t your typical *male* acquaintance, and he has a very bad reputation with the ladies.”

“He brags about his exploits because it enhances his notoriety as a cad, but I’m certain much of it is rumor and innuendo.”

“I can befriend his stable boys. They’ll tell me what’s true and what isn’t.”

“I don’t plan to ever see him again, so you don’t need to spy on him for me.”

“It appears that *he* might continue seeing you though. He pops up when we least expect it. Would you like him to court you? You might be happier. If he misbehaves with you, should I mind my own business and

look the other way?"

She forced a smile. "What a silly question. I have no intention of misbehaving. Not with him or anyone."

She couldn't bear how he was studying her, as if he could dig down to the bottom of her soul and pry out all her secrets. She was blatantly fibbing, and he realized she was.

For reasons she couldn't explain, she was on the verge of weeping, as if Hunter Stone had made promises and had broken them. It crushed her to picture him consorting with trollops like Isabella Darling, but it was none of her affair.

She whipped away and kept on to her apartment, not keen to tarry and let her brother ask more questions that would leave her more distressed than she already was.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"That's a nasty cut. How did you injure yourself?"

"I had an accident while I was in town."

"It must have been some accident."

"It was."

Rebecca sat in the dining parlor at Parkhurst, watching Mr. Carew chat with Winston. She'd snuck down to breakfast at an early hour when she'd expected the room to be empty, but to her dismay, both men had been present.

Winston had had pressing business in London, and he'd dashed to the city, spent the night, then returned with his hand injured. A towel was wrapped around it and tied tight, but she could see where blood had seeped through.

"Have you summoned a doctor?" Mr. Carew asked.

"Not yet, but I'm planning on it."

"You'll probably need it stitched."

"Thank you for pointing that out. If you hadn't mentioned it, the prospect wouldn't have occurred to me." Winston's tone was very sarcastic, but then, he couldn't be feeling very well. He said to Mr. Carew, "Aren't you leaving this morning? It's what my wife tells me."

The comment wasn't overtly rude, but at the same juncture, it was incredibly rude too. Mr. Carew had stopped by without an invitation, and because they had so few visitors, her mother had been accommodating.

Rebecca wanted to confess to her mother that Mr. Carew was urging her to run away with him, but she was afraid Amelia would blame her for fueling the situation. She was frightened of Mr. Carew, and she couldn't seem to deflect his quiet seduction. A bigger worry was that he might approach Amelia with a proposal of marriage.

Or he might kidnap Rebecca and whisk her away without anyone recognizing what had transpired. At school, there had been stories about that sort of thing happening to heiresses. The kidnappers were always rakes who redeemed themselves, and the heiresses wound up being glad,



but Rebecca didn't think it would be romantic to run away with Mr. Carew.

She simply wished he'd quit bothering her, but he wouldn't, so she'd started hiding in various spots where she wouldn't be found. Luckily, her mother hadn't remarked on her lack of socializing and hadn't pestered her as to why.

She had to travel to London to speak to Hannah. Initially, she'd been scared to confide in Hannah, but Hannah would be able to advise her as to how she should proceed with regard to numerous issues.

Would her mother allow a trip to town? Rebecca would have to obtain her permission, and she doubted Amelia would agree.

"Would you excuse me?" she murmured.

She stood and fled, and neither man noticed her departure. She scurried up to her bedchamber, but as she went down the hall toward her room, Mr. Carew appeared at the other end. The fiend must have rushed up the rear stairs.

He hurried over and clasped her hands. "I'm leaving in a few minutes. Won't you come with me? You don't even have to pack a bag. You can meet me out on the lane."

"My mother would find out, and she'd prevent me."

"How about if you slipped away at night? You could tiptoe out when she's sleeping."

He was so determined, and she felt as if she'd never escape his machinations. She hadn't responded to his suggestion, and he vehemently said, "You can't stay here with them. Let me keep you safe!"

"I can't imagine sneaking away. I would be so difficult." Why wouldn't he take *no* for an answer?

"It would be very easy. You'd creep out after everyone was in bed. We'd jump in my carriage and race away. You'd be free of your mother forever."

"What would we do after we left? Would we marry?"

"Yes, I'd carry you to Scotland and make you my bride. Mr. and Mrs. Webster could never hurt you after that. You would belong to me. Not them."

She pretended to ponder, then she lied to him. "All right. Mother is supposed to go to London in two weeks. You could return for me then."

The truth was that her mother never went anywhere. She would be at Parkhurst just like always, so she'd furnish a bit of a barrier to Mr. Carew's advances. Hopefully, Rebecca would have figured out how to get to London by then, and she would have Hannah to protect her. Jackson too.

If she told Jackson about how Mr. Carew had been annoying her, he might punch the horrid man in the nose.

"Are you sure about this?" he said. "If you don't mean it, I'll be crushed."

"I'll meet you out by the front gate. In two weeks."

"Shortly after midnight, on Saturday. I'll be waiting for you. Bring only a small portmanteau of the necessities. Don't choose anything heavy that would slow you down."

"I'll pack carefully."

To her great relief, footsteps sounded behind them, and she moved away from him.

"It was lovely of you to visit," she said. "Have a nice trip."

He whispered, "Two weeks from today! I shall be on pins and needles until then."

She flashed a vague smile, then continued on as a maid appeared.

"Could you assist me?" She posed the question to the girl loudly enough that Mr. Carew would realize she wouldn't be by herself and he shouldn't follow her.

"Yes, what is it you need?" the girl asked.

Rebecca grabbed her arm and led her to her bedchamber.

"Would you tarry with me for a moment?" she said. "Then I'd like you to peek out and tell me if Mr. Carew is still there."

"Yes, certainly."

"I don't like him!" she blurted out.

"Neither does anyone else." The girl winked, then glanced out into the hall. "He's gone, Miss Rebecca."

"Thank you."

"I'll head down to the foyer and watch to guarantee he rides off. I'll come back and let you know, so don't worry."

The maid flitted out, and Rebecca locked the door. She walked to the window and stared at the horizon until she was informed that he'd departed. She breathed a huge sigh, feeling as if she'd dodged a bullet.

It was time to speak with her mother about Winston and his assertion that he was Rebecca's father. When Mr. Carew had still been in residence, she hadn't dared raise the issue, for it would have stirred a hornet's nest while they'd had a guest.

She proceeded straight to Amelia's suite and was glad to find her alone. She was seated on the stool at her dressing table. She constantly studied herself in the mirror to check for signs of aging that Winston wouldn't like.

"What do you want?" she demanded when Rebecca entered. "You've been staggering about, looking as morose as an undertaker. What's wrong?"

"You wouldn't ever betroth me to Mr. Carew, would you?"

Her mother spun around and scoffed. "Gad, no. He's too far beneath you. I would never consider it."

Rebecca should have received some solace from the denial, but Amelia had tried to engage her to Viscount Marston, even though Rebecca had been deeply opposed. After that debacle, Rebecca would never trust her mother again.

"Swear it," Rebecca said with a particular intensity. "Swear you won't give me to Mr. Carew."

"I won't; I swear. Will that be all?"

"No. I have to ask another question, but you won't like it."

"What is it? Please spit it out. Don't dither and waste my time."

"A few days ago, I heard you and Winston talking when I shouldn't have."

"Shame on you."

"I was in the hall and your door wasn't closed."

"That's no excuse for rude conduct." Amelia was out of patience. "Spit it *out*, Rebecca. What is vexing you?"

"Is Winston my real father? I thought it was Sir Edmund, but is it Winston?"

Amelia gasped, then her expression grew sly. "No, Winston is not your father. What an absurd notion!"

"He said it out loud."

"If you think so, then you're gravely mistaken."

"It's why people are so awful to me, isn't it? Everyone knows."

Amelia waved her out. "Go away. I can't abide you when you whine

and nag.”

“I’m not whining. I just wish you’d tell me the truth.”

“I’ve told it to you your entire life: Sir Edmund Graves is your father.”

But while Amelia forcefully declared it, she couldn’t hold Rebecca’s gaze. Her mother could claim whatever she liked, but Rebecca wouldn’t believe her.

“If Sir Edmund isn’t my father,” she started, but her mother cut her off.

“He *is* your father, and if you utter such a ridiculous tale in the future, I will slap you silly, then lock you in your bedchamber for a month.”

Rebecca was undeterred. “If Sir Edmund isn’t my father, then it’s not right that half of Parkhurst was bequeathed to me. The property should have passed to Hannah. Maybe Jackson too, but not to me.”

Amelia’s temper soared, and she leapt up so fast that her stool toppled over. She grabbed Rebecca and shook her very hard.

“Your surname of Graves,” she said, “and your ownership of Parkhurst are the only things that make you special. You will not cast them off with false allegations. Cease your nonsense immediately!”

“I refuse to be Winston’s daughter.”

“We are *not* discussing it! Be silent.”

Amelia marched out, and she dragged Rebecca with her. They stomped to Rebecca’s room, and Amelia pushed her inside.

“You have enraged me beyond my limit,” her mother said, “so you will remain sequestered to reflect on how much you’ve upset me.”

“I demand to go to London,” was Rebecca’s reply. “I want to live with Hannah instead of you. If you won’t give me permission, I’ll run away to be with her—whether you like it or not.”

“You’re too much of a coward to behave rashly. Besides, you couldn’t stay with her.”

“Yes, I could! She invited me!”

“I simply mean that she’s had some difficulties in town.”

Rebecca scowled. “What kind of difficulties? What happened?”

“I’m not sure. Winston mentioned that there was a problem at her shop, so I imagine she’ll be moving home shortly.”

“She would never move back here.”

“Well, circumstances change, don’t they? And catastrophe can strike when you least expect it. Hannah had a lesson to learn.”

“What lesson? What did Winston do to her?”

“Winston? He was merely repeating gossip. Now then, you will be locked in until you can promise me you’ve adjusted your attitude.”

“I’m not a child anymore. You can’t treat me like this.”

“Can’t I?”

Amelia pulled the door shut, and before Rebecca could stop her, she spun the key.

Rebecca rushed over and jerked on the knob, but to no avail. She knocked and hollered for help, but no one heard her, or if they did hear, no one arrived to discover what was wrong.

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Hannah was asleep when a noise down in the shop awakened her. She told herself a stack of books must have fallen. The only other option would be a burglary, and if it was, she couldn’t stand to know. She crushed a pillow over her head to drown out any other sounds.

She was roused by Jackson shaking her.

“Hannah!” he urgently said. “There’s a fire.”

“What?” She lurched up and glanced around frantically.

“Come! Let’s get out of here before we *can’t* get out.”

She’d been slumbering so deeply that she couldn’t process what was occurring. “I should put on some clothes. I should...ah...ah...”

“There’s no time.”

As he yanked her up, she noticed he was fully dressed, so he must have snuck out after she’d gone to bed. *She* was wearing just her nightgown. Her hair was down and hanging loose over her shoulders. The temperature was chilly, so she had floppy woolen socks on her feet, but that was it.

He found her robe and stuffed her arms in the sleeves, then he guided her out to the parlor. He opened the door and peeked out, but instantly, smoke drifted in and became intolerable. She coughed, struggling for air, and a wave of fright washed over her. She couldn’t see anything, and she was quaking like a leaf.

“Is the shop on fire?” she asked him. “Have you been down there?”

“No, I was in bed.” She had no idea if that was a lie or not. “But I

heard a crash, then I smelled smoke, so I came to fetch you.”

“Can we still use the stairs?”

“We have to try.”

The stairs led down to a rear storage room, where there was a door into the alley. If the main portion of the building was ablaze, there was no other exit for them.

“Don’t move,” he said. “It’s so dark, and I don’t want to lose track of you.”

“What are you thinking?”

He slid away without replying, and he returned a second later. He’d grabbed a knitted throw off the sofa, and he pushed it over her face to block out some of the smoke, then he said, “We have to run for our lives. Otherwise, I’m afraid we’ll have to jump out the window.”

“I’m not jumping out any windows.”

“Don’t let go. Ready?”

“Yes, ready.”

He went down first, and she followed, clutching his hand as tightly as she could. They arrived at the bottom with no difficulty, but the whole shop was engulfed. The sight was incredibly distressing, but there was no time to lament. The flames hadn’t reached the storage room, so they staggered blindly past boxes and crates until they located the rear door.

He fumbled with the security bar, lifted it, and tossed it away. Then they practically fell out into the alley.

People were calling out with dismay, and somewhere, a bell was ringing the alarm. A brigade would be assembled, but it would take forever for a line to form and water to be passed.

They stumbled out to the street where the scene was even more chaotic. Her building was burning, but so were several others. The flames were visible on the upper floor where she and Jackson had resided. If they’d delayed another few minutes, they’d have been trapped.

On realizing the depth of the inferno, her knees gave out, and Jackson caught her around the waist. They huddled side by side, observing in horror as neighbors milled and mingled. Children were crying, dogs howling. Men were shouting orders, shoving spectators away, inquiring about others.

Were there any victims inside? Had everyone escaped to safety?

Eventually, a water wagon pulled up. Buckets were filled and water hurled onto the flames, but it was much too late. An entire block burned to the ground before they were able to get the conflagration under control.

Because London's buildings were so old and so closely packed together, the loss of *only* a city block was considered a huge success story. As dawn broke on the horizon, men were patting themselves on the back, exclaiming over a good night's work.

But Hannah had lost everything. She sat, braced against the wall of a building across from her own, and she felt as if she'd been turned to stone. She watched as her roof collapsed, as the walls collapsed, and finally, her beloved shop was naught but a pile of ash.

Out of all her possessions, she had her nightgown and robe, the knitted throw wrapped over her shoulders, but that was all she'd managed to salvage.

There was nothing else.

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"No, I won't talk to him."

"He's not asking for you, Miss Darling. He's asking for Lord Marston."

"The Viscount isn't downstairs yet. Last I checked, he was still in bed, and I have no idea why a strange boy would search for him here. He can bugger off."

Isabella wasn't usually crude in her language, but she was irked to have been bothered by someone knocking on her door. It was just after seven, and she rarely rose so early, but Hunter had a busy day ahead of him and had to leave.

She'd had to drag herself down to ensure he was fed a proper breakfast, and to deliver an even more proper farewell, but she was always grouchy when she didn't get enough sleep.

While he was dressing, she'd come down alone, and she was seated at the dining room table. She grinned with approval over how perfect her life was with Hunter paying the bills, and she couldn't imagine the situation ending. It *wouldn't* end either. Not if she had her way.

He hadn't visited her for several nights in a row, which she never

liked. When he wasn't with her, she had to jealously worry about who he was with instead.

She stretched and purred like a contented cat. She was wearing a negligee, a flimsy robe over the top. The ensemble was new and French, and she'd used it to great effect.

She smirked into her tea. Yes, he'd definitely been *satisfied* with her efforts, so she was certain she could raise the issue of the mistress interviews again, without his barking at her. She probably should have been packing her bags, preparing to move out of the house that had been hers for the prior year, but she was so positive she could persuade him to keep her that she hadn't made a single arrangement.

The footman, the one who'd mentioned there was a boy at the door, hadn't left. He was hovering insolently, and she glared at him and said, "What?"

"I don't believe I ought to send him away without apprising Lord Marston that he has a messenger. What if there is an emergency with his father or his brothers?"

Isabella gnawed on her cheek. She didn't want any problem to lure Hunter away one second quicker than he was already planning to go. Then again, what if it was important?

"Bring him in, and I'll let him speak his piece, but he better mind his manners. If he's impertinent, I'll have you toss him out bodily."

The footman walked off, then was back shortly to announce, "It's Jackson, Miss Darling."

"Jackson...what?" she asked. "Is he an orphan? Has he no surname?"

The footman shrugged, then the boy entered. She studied him, thinking he looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. He was dirty, his face smudged black, his clothes too, and he smelled like smoke.

She wrinkled her nose. "What happened to you?"

His answer was impudent. "Is Viscount Marston here? I must confer with him immediately."

"You are in a wretched condition, and this is a respectable residence. You have some nerve arriving in such a disheveled state. And no, the Viscount isn't here. Tell me your message, then get out."

"I'd rather not discuss it with you."

She narrowed her gaze, her temper sparking. "I know you, don't I?"



Didn't we meet at that pathetic bookshop that's owned by that horrid Miss Graves? You were incredibly rude to me there. I suggest you depart or I shall inform the Viscount of how you acted. You won't be quite so arrogant after he takes a belt to you."

Her stern words didn't daunt the little cretin. He glowered at the footman and asked, "Is Viscount Marston on the premises or not? My mission is dire, and if he's not, I have to search for him elsewhere. I don't have time to debate with a trollop."

"You infuriating brat!" she fumed. "You'd best leave or you won't like what's about to transpire. I guarantee it."

She leapt to her feet, as if she'd throw him out herself. She was bigger than he was, so she suspected she could wrestle him away, but she wouldn't embarrass herself. She was simply anxious for him to fear that she'd manhandle him.

The footman pursed his lips and told the boy, "I'll fetch the Viscount for you. How about if you wait in the foyer?"

Isabella was deftly ignored, but then, the servants worked for Hunter. Not her. They would never side with her in any quarrel, would never engage in any action that would upset him. It was aggravating in the extreme.

Before the pair could exit though, footsteps sounded behind her, and Hunter strolled in. He was barely dressed, his shirt half-buttoned, his cravat not tied, the lace hanging loose on his chest. His delectable blond hair was down and curling around his shoulders.

He appeared dashing and wonderful, and she preened, pleased that he'd had a very enjoyable evening—and all because of her.

"What this?" he said to the footman. "Company so early?"

"It's an urgent message for you, Lord Marston. Miss Darling didn't want me to bother you, but I didn't suppose I should listen to her about it."

"I didn't say that!" Isabella huffed, but they didn't pay any attention to her.

Hunter peered over at the boy, and he blanched. "Jackson! Why are you here? My goodness! Look at you! What's wrong?"

"I need you to come with me. I need you to come now. I didn't know who to ask, and I need help."

"Oh...well...yes, I guess I can come now."

“Hunter,” she complained, “we haven’t eaten. He can tarry in the street until you’re in a better condition.”

Hunter flashed a glare that warned her to be silent, that she was being a pest, and his blue eyes were riveting and a tad terrifying. Just that moment, he might have uttered any frightening comment, and she couldn’t have stopped him, but he’d always been a gentleman. He wouldn’t bicker with her in front of the servants.

“Let’s go,” he said to Jackson, but he said nothing to her.

“When will you be back?” she inquired. “Should I delay my breakfast so we can dine together?”

His anger flared, but it was quickly masked. “You can proceed without me.” He turned to the urchin and said, “Shall I harness my carriage?”

“No, I hired a cab. The driver is parked outside. It’s faster.”

The boy started out, and Hunter marched after him without a final glance in her direction. As Isabella watched him slither out, it occurred to her that she might have been invisible.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“How did the fire start?”

“We don’t know.”

Hunter stared at Jackson, feeling disoriented, as if he was dreaming. When he’d strolled into Isabella’s dining parlor, and Jackson had been standing there, the boy had been so out of place that he hadn’t seemed real.

He hadn’t eaten breakfast and was disheveled in his appearance. As they rolled along, he’d finished buttoning his shirt and had tied his cravat into a quick, messy knot. For the moment, it would have to suffice.

Hannah’s shop had burned to the ground? She and Jackson had barely escaped the inferno?

Hunter shared such a potent attraction with her, and he was alarmed over what she’d endured. It was insane for her to be in London by herself. If she’d had a rational family, she’d never have been allowed to engage in such risky conduct.

“I heard glass breaking,” Jackson said, “but I ignored it. Then I smelled smoke. I shook Hannah awake, and we ran down the stairs and out into the alley.”

“Could you tell where it began?”

“It was in Hannah’s building. It’s what the volunteers in the fire brigade were claiming.”

“She had books on the shelves,” Hunter said, “and they don’t automatically ignite. What could have lit the spark?”

“There was an inspector snooping around. He believes a torch was thrown through her window.”

Hunter scowled. “Who would do that? Hannah is charming and harmless. Who would want to hurt her?”

“Maybe Winston Webster? He’s always been awful to her.”

“Yes, but their animosity has simmered for years. Why would he suddenly lash out? They quarreled when she was at Parkhurst, but don’t they always quarrel?”

Hunter suffered a twinge of worry. He'd manhandled Webster at Parkhurst, and Webster had an ego as big as a house. Might that have been the catalyst for the disaster?

As rapidly as the prospect arose, he shoved it away. Webster was petty and stupid, and he was very lazy too. Hunter simply couldn't envision him mustering the energy to travel to London to wreck Hannah's home and business.

Their driver pulled his horse to a halt, and Hunter glanced out, saying to Jackson, "We're not on Hannah's street."

"It's closed off. We'll have to walk the rest of the way."

Jackson opened the door and jumped out, and Hunter followed him. The boy paid their fare and took off at a brisk pace. Hunter thanked the man himself and slipped him a bit more for his trouble, then he hurried after Jackson.

They approached the area, and a smoky pall hung over everything. They rounded the corner, and he was stunned to see the devastation that had been inflicted. An entire city block had been reduced to piles of ash.

Spectators were milling, looking astonished. They chatted quietly, as if they were at a funeral, and who could guess? Perhaps there were dead bodies in the rubble. All of the shops most likely had had living quarters located on the upper floor. If he subsequently learned there had been casualties, he wouldn't be surprised.

They stopped in front of what had been Hannah's business, but there was no indication it had ever been a bookshop. A few sturdier items were visible—a stove, two chimneys—but for the most part, it had been destroyed.

His heart sank. What would become of her?

She'd been so proud of her endeavors, so proud of how she was earning an income and supporting her brother. How would she regroup and start over?

He and Jackson stood side by side, gazing at the debris, then he turned to Jackson and asked, "You could have sought assistance from anyone. Why did you fetch me?"

Jackson shrugged. "You like her, and I couldn't think of anyone else who does."

It was a pathetic comment on the state of her affairs, but it pleased him too. He'd been provided with a chance to be her knight in shining

armor, and for once, he'd be delighted to embrace the role.

"Has she any possessions left?" he said. "Anything at all?"

"No, for either of us. When we raced out, I was already dressed, but she was in her nightclothes, so she doesn't even have a gown or pair of shoes."

Hunter felt terribly aggrieved for her, but happy too that he was her friend. He was rich and had more money than he could ever spend. If Hannah needed a new wardrobe, he could certainly buy her one.

"Where is she?" he inquired.

"Over there." Jackson motioned to a tea house down on the corner. "Many of the survivors are settled inside. The owner and his wife have been feeding them and calming them down. They've sent out messages, informing relatives and acquaintances of what happened."

"And *you* thought of me." He patted the boy on the shoulder. "I'm thrilled that you did."

"I assumed you could advise her on how she should proceed. I have no idea."

"We'll figure it out."

"She's shocked and confused," Jackson said. "Promise me you'll be kind to her."

"Of course I'll be kind. I promise. She'll always be safe with me."

Hunter went down to the tea house, and he entered to a subdued scene. People were huddled in small groups, whispering and crying. Hannah appeared particularly woebegone. She was seated at a table by herself and still in her nightclothes, though as a bow to modesty, someone had given her a cloak that she'd draped over her shoulders.

She had a knitted throw folded over her legs, as if she was cold and couldn't get warm. Her face was smudged, her hair tangled, and she was especially tragic, especially beautiful. His pulse pounded at the sight of her.

She was staring at her feet and didn't notice him. As he walked over to her, an unusual wave of affection assailed him. From the moment they'd met, he'd liked her much more than he should, and he was being pelted by the most potent masculine instincts. He wanted to watch over her, to protect her forever so no calamity could befall her ever again. She had no parents to guide her, no sane kin to step in. Would she let him fix what was wrong?

He hoped she would, and if she wouldn't listen, he'd ignore her.

"Hannah Graves!" he said. "I can't leave you alone for two seconds."

On hearing his voice, she jumped as if he'd poked her with a pin. "Hunter! Am I glad to see you!"

He grinned. "You used my Christian name. We're making progress."

"How did you know I needed you?"

"Jackson tracked me down."

"I was wondering where he was, but I've been too weary to search for him in the crowd."

Hunter grabbed a chair and drew it close so their legs were tangled together. He clasped her hands in his.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Tell me the truth. Don't pretend to be fine if you're not."

"Physically, I'm fine, but emotionally, I'm heartbroken. I lost everything, and I escaped in just my nightclothes. It's all I managed to salvage." She gestured to the cloak. "A stranger gave me this so I could cover myself."

"I deem it to be perfectly expected that I would stumble on you in such a desperate condition."

"What shall I do?"

She looked young and bewildered, a damsel in distress. Tears flooded her eyes, and she tried to keep them at bay, but there were too many. They overflowed onto her cheeks, and though she attempted to swipe them away, she couldn't.

Typically, he couldn't abide a histrionic woman. When he reached a point with a female where she was reduced to weeping, he vanished. With her though, it never crossed his mind to depart.

"Don't be sad," he said. "I'll help you. It's why Jackson brought me to you."

"What will become of me?"

"We don't have to answer that question this morning. This morning, we can simply be grateful you weren't hurt."

He dragged her onto his lap so she was snuggled to his chest. He held her, murmuring soft words in her ear and stroking a soothing palm up and down her back. She cried until there were no tears left to shed, until her limbs were rubbery and his shirt dampened to a complete mess.

Finally, she said, "I have to go somewhere. I can't sit here, taking up space, but I'm so befuddled by events that I can't make a single decision." She straightened and gazed at him. "What would you suggest?"

While she'd wept so sorrowfully, he'd had a lengthy interval to ponder a solution. "I know exactly what should happen. Let's find Jackson, and we'll be on our way."

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Hannah walked down the stairs at Hunter's country home of Marston Manor, and she was so nervous she was practically tiptoeing. Since the fire had incinerated her world, so much had transpired that she felt totally dazed.

As she'd dawdled in the tea house, she'd been very afraid, as if she was out of options, which had been silly. The Parkhurst bank accounts should have been available for her to draw on, but it was constantly on the verge of bankruptcy, so she had no cushion to bolster herself in an emergency.

But she had friends in London, people like Sybil Jones. Or there were several cordial ladies at the church she attended. There were old friends of her father's everywhere too.

She could have sought aid from any of them, but it would most likely have manifested itself as coach fare to Parkhurst. It was where everyone thought she belonged, but with her life in shambles, she hadn't been thinking clearly. She'd moped and lamented over her plight, and Jackson had realized she needed someone wealthy and powerful to guide her, so he'd located Hunter.

It was embarrassing to admit, but apparently, she was weak and dithering and couldn't remain calm in a crisis. Hunter and Jackson had joined forces to save her, and for the moment, she was delighted to have them be in charge.

She'd been so proud of what she'd accomplished, but pride was a terrible sin. Was she being punished for her vanity? She had to pick a path that would lead her forward, and there had to be at least one route that wouldn't deliver her to Parkhurst.

*What now?* she asked herself, then she shook off the question.

She didn't have to worry. Yet. She was with Hunter and Jackson, and

she would rest and regroup until her mental faculties had improved.

At a speed that had amazed her, Hunter had whisked them to Marston. It was only two hours from London, and they'd arrived before she'd had much opportunity to reflect on whether she should have accompanied him or not.

No doubt he had nefarious designs on her, and a more sensible female might have been wary, but just then—when she didn't even own a gown anymore—she didn't care about much of anything. She was too numb.

With his recently inheriting his title, he hadn't exhibited much interest in the rural property, being content instead to wallow in town like the rake he was. He had a land agent, butler, and housekeeper to watch over the place, and they'd run it for his cousin before the man had passed away.

Luckily, they were incredibly efficient, and they took their obligations seriously, so the estate was in a pristine condition. None of them had expected him to pop in unannounced though, so he'd created a huge stir when his coach had rattled to a stop in the driveway. The staff had sprung into action, adeptly catering to his whims and wishes.

He had a natural flare for giving orders, and the servants seemed in awe of him. He'd explained Hannah and Jackson's situation, that they'd be staying for awhile and would require significant help to get back on their feet, and she'd been stunned by the kind response.

The entire evening, she'd been pampered by a bevy of sweet-tempered housemaids who'd doted on her. They'd found her and Jackson a few items of clothing in trunks in the attic, and those items would suit them until she could figure out how to purchase a new wardrobe.

She'd been bathed and fed and had been deposited in a grand bed with a stuffed feather mattress that had been fit for a princess. She'd been so exhausted that she hadn't come down to supper, so she hadn't seen Hunter or Jackson again.

After a marvelous night of sleep—sixteen delicious hours—she would busy herself with showing both of them how grateful she was for their precious concern.

A footman directed her to a breakfast parlor where another bevy of servants was waiting to coddle her. She'd grown up around servants, but



she hadn't had any in London. Whenever she visited Parkhurst, there was such a turnover of employees that the skilled ones had all fled, so the competence at Marston was greatly appreciated.

She couldn't predict how long Hunter would permit her to tarry or what she'd do when she left, so she would simply relax and enjoy herself, as if she was on a holiday in the country with her wealthy, handsome friend.

Later on, there would be plenty of time for frightening rumination.

She entered the dining room and sighed with delight. As with every other room in the house, it was beautifully appointed, with tall windows, plush rugs, colorful paintings, and comfortable furniture. It was testament to the affluence of the Stone family.

Hunter was seated at the table, and he grinned a grin she felt clear down to her toes.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he said. "I was going to give you ten more minutes to stagger down, and if you didn't arrive, I was starting without you."

"I'm famished."

"That's splendid to hear. It means you're already getting better." There were four footmen hovering, and he gestured to them. "We've been impatiently watching for you. May I shoo them out and we can serve ourselves? Or would you like to be pampered a bit more?"

"We can serve ourselves. I'm fine with that."

He nodded to the servants, and they departed. Once the door closed, he stood and held out a chair for her. She walked over, and he dipped in and kissed her.

"I missed you last night," he said. "When you didn't join us for supper, I was bereft. After I fawned over you all day, it hurt my feelings."

"I'm sure that's not true. I don't believe you have many feelings, so I couldn't possibly have hurt them."

He snorted with amusement. "You wound me with your disregard, Miss Graves."

With a theatrical flourish of his arm, he indicated she should sit, and she plopped down.

"Will you trust me to dish up a plate for you?" he asked. "Or are you convinced I'll make all the wrong choices?"

“Go ahead and spoil me rotten.”

“Are you difficult to please?”

“Not usually.”

There was a buffet arranged behind them, and he snooped through the warmed pans. “There’s some of everything: ham, bacon, eggs, scones. What is your preference?”

“I intend to display a rare burst of gluttony, so I’ll have some of it all.”

He filled a plate to overflowing, then he filled one for himself. It was a large table that could have fit twenty people, but they were at a corner. He positioned himself next to her, near enough that their feet were touching.

They were alone, and it was very quiet. Suddenly, the encounter grew intimate, and she was nervous about eating in front of him. It seemed scandalous, as if she was about to take off her clothes or let down her hair.

He didn’t appear to notice any awkwardness. He began gobbling down his food as if he were a starving man who’d been offered a banquet. After a minute, he realized she hadn’t jumped in too, and he paused, his fork dangling in mid-air.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Don’t you like the food? You can’t tell me that or my chef will be crushed.”

“It just occurred to me that I’m overwhelmed.”

“By what?”

“By you. By this house. By what’s happened to me.”

“Well, that’s understandable, isn’t it? This manor is incredible, you survived a disaster, and *I* am remarkable. Who wouldn’t be overwhelmed?”

She chuckled. “You’re humble too.”

“Yes,” he facetiously said, “humility practically oozes out of me.” He reached over and squeezed her hand. “You have to eat. I think it will be helpful if we immerse you in common routines, like meals and visiting and reading by the fire in the evenings. That way, you won’t feel as if the world has just ended.”

“You read by the fire in the evenings?”

“Yes. Don’t you?”

“I haven’t had a hearth lately, but yes, I love to read in the

evenings.”

“I’m not the barbarian you suppose. Except for some of my wilder tendencies, that I am determined to conceal from you, I’m actually quite ordinary.”

“There’s nothing ordinary about you.”

He winked. “You might be right about that.”

He started in again, and she picked up her fork and started in too. He was correct that she had to settle her mind, to remember that she was hale and alive. She would successfully reorganize her life, and she refused to accept that she wouldn’t.

She cleaned her plate, and he cleaned his too, then he downed a second portion. She sipped her tea and watched him, and she was intrigued by the familiarity that had developed between them. They might have had breakfast together a thousand times prior.

He was such a charming person, and his relaxed manner made her want to linger in his delightful company forever. She recognized that he was drawing her into his web, that before too long, she’d likely be ensnared and eager to provide him with whatever he sought from her, but for the moment, she was simply content to revel by his side.

“Where is Jackson?” she asked. “I’m such an irresponsible sibling that I haven’t worried about him.”

“He’s out in the stables and learning to ride. My stablemaster is teaching him.”

Her jaw dropped in surprise. “I had no idea he didn’t know how.”

“He’s a city boy through and through, and his mother never had the funds to keep a carriage, let alone pay for equestrian lessons.” He frowned. “Has he told you much about her? He told *me* plenty, but I had to pry out every detail.”

“She was my father’s mistress for awhile—until he planted Jackson in her belly. His interest waned quickly after that.” She wrinkled her nose. “I hate to imagine my father being that fickle, but apparently, he was.”

“My father was acquainted with yours.”

“Really? Were they cordial?”

“No. Sir Edmund was a...how shall I politely say this? A blowhard? A braggart?”

She cringed. “Yes, that sounds like Sir Edmund.”

“And *my* father, for all his moral failings, is a very frivolous man who likes to loaf, gamble, and chase loose women who always wind up falling madly in love with him. He and Sir Edmund wouldn’t have had anything in common.”

“I’m ashamed of Sir Edmund for how he treated Jackson’s mother.”

“It wasn’t your fault, so you needn’t be ashamed. You can rectify some of his mistakes by giving Jackson the life he deserves.”

“It’s been my goal ever since he showed up at my door.”

“What path are you envisioning for him?” he asked.

“I’d like him to finish his schooling, then attend university, but I’d have to find some good scholarships. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m in a financial bind, so I couldn’t afford to send him myself.”

“He’d be happier in the army.”

“Were you happy in the army?”

“Very happy—until I was nearly killed. That sort of incident can ruin a fellow’s perspective.”

“You seem like such a shirker to me. I can’t picture you mustering the energy to become a soldier.”

He raised a brow. “I possess many redeeming qualities, but I keep them hidden.”

“Yes, and it’s beyond me why you go out of your way to display bad habits.”

He snickered, looking lucky and satisfied with his choices, and he said, “I like Jackson.”

“So do I.”

“He should join the army, but as an officer. He’s a born leader, so you ought to buy him a commission.”

She tsked with irritation. “Yes, I’ll get working on that situation right away. I have so much money to throw around.”

“I might be able to pitch in. We’ll see how our relationship unfolds.”

“Meaning what?” She scowled ferociously. “It appears you’re offering me a salacious deal: I give you something you want, and you help my brother in return.”

It was impossible to embarrass or cow him. He simply grinned. “I’m renowned for my salacious deals.”

A warning bell clanged in her mind as she recalled Isabella Darling’s tales of his sordid tastes, of his interviewing for a second

mistress, but she shoved the stories away. Miss Darling was a troublemaker, and when he was being kind and generous, she wouldn't focus on lurid gossip that painted him in a horrendous light.

"How long will you let me stay here?" she asked.

"I haven't decided. How long will it be before you begin to annoy me?"

"You're such a pompous beast. I'm betting you grow irked in the next ten minutes. You like meek, docile females and I'm not one."

"Who said I like meek, docile females?"

"You?"

"Yes, but since I met you, I'm broadening my horizons."

His grin widened, and he was so full of himself. She rested her elbow on the table, her chin on her hand, and she tarried like that, filling her eyes with the sight of him. He was used to feminine adulation, and he dawdled as she ogled him.

"My life is a mess," she ultimately said.

"I know, and I was thinking, while you're visiting, we should spend the time figuring out how to get you back on track. Starting with Parkhurst. You should be residing there, instead of in London by yourself. You don't have the funds now, do you? To rebuild your shop?"

"No. I purchased it with a bequest from my father, so it's all gone. I can return to Parkhurst, but it will require enormous fights with my relatives, which I can't bear. Plus, the estate is almost bankrupt, so it doesn't exactly represent a fiscal panacea."

"Why would it be bankrupt? It's a beautiful property, located in the heart of the kingdom."

"There is never any money left at the end of the year."

"Winston Webster is most likely robbing you blind when you're not there to keep an eye on him."

"Probably, but you walked in on us that day when I was quarreling with him. You saw how difficult it is to make him heed me."

"I predict—if you evicted him and hired a competent manager—you'd be fine."

"Maybe, but then, I'd have to become a spinsterish matron living quietly in the country. The notion is particularly depressing. I enjoyed being an independent female who gadded about in the city on her own terms."

He smirked with disgust. "I'm sure you enjoyed it, but it was completely unnatural for you to carry on that way."

She burst out laughing. "When you utter idiotic remarks like that, you could be my elderly grandfather. It's the modern age, Hunter. Haven't you heard? Women can thrive at all sorts of ventures."

"Who told you such nonsense? Women should stay where the Good Lord placed them. If they don't, it upsets the balance of the universe."

She chortled merrily. "You are so ridiculous, but I like you anyway."

He closed the distance between them, and he kissed her for a very long time. After a bit, he pulled her off her chair and onto his lap. He continued until her body was ablaze with desire, and she wanted things from him she couldn't explain or define.

It definitely had her worrying about her sojourn at Marston Manor. If he commenced a determined seduction, she'd be putty in his hands and unable to save herself.

"How are you feeling?" he asked when their lips parted.

"Perfect."

"I have an event scheduled for myself, and I was wondering if you'd like to join me."

"What is it?"

"My land agent is giving me a tour of the estate to introduce me to the main tenant farmers."

"That is such a marvelous idea, and I view you as such a scapegrace. I can't believe you thought of it."

"Would you accompany me? I would like your opinion about what we observe."

"I would love to come with you. What about Jackson? Shall we invite him too?"

"He's too busy. After his riding lesson, he's boxing with my blacksmith."

"Boxing!" she huffed. "I won't have him learning to fight. Who decided he should?"

"Me. Who would you suppose? He's lived his life around women, and he has to be taught a few tricks that none of you would consider to be valuable."

"But...boxing! He shouldn't be trained to brawl. It's so unnecessary."

“You’re wrong about that. He’s the type of fellow who will always be in the middle of the action. He needs to have different skills than you can provide.”

She scoffed with annoyance. “When did all this male bonding transpire?”

“Last night. We spent hours together—without you there to interrupt—and I questioned him relentlessly about his past and his goals. I have plans for him that would never have occurred to you.”

“It sounds as if you’ve devised a route I wouldn’t like. I could put my foot down and refuse to permit your interference.”

“I’ll ignore you. He’s almost an adult, and he should begin making his own choices, without clinging to your apron strings.”

“I barely know him,” she said, “and I don’t coddle him.”

“Yes, you do, but he’s managed so far without much help from those who should have furnished it, and I think he’s amazing. I can supply boons you can’t, so he’ll be my burden from this point on.”

She should have glowered and protested, but he was so confident that he was right. And he was correct that Jackson was nearly an adult. She’d had no role in his rearing, and he regularly alarmed her by espousing attitudes that were a tad frightening.

Hunter Stone was immersed in a man’s world in a manner she would never understand. Perhaps it would be beneficial to have a male in charge of him.

“I guess I can allow you to mold some of his rough edges,” she said.

He snorted. “You are such a milksop. Before we’re through, I will have ground you down so you give me whatever I demand.”

“I’m sure that’s true.”

“Let’s get going. My land agent has been cooling his heels for hours, waiting for us to be ready.”

“Oh, you should have told me! I could have hurried.”

“I don’t want you to hurry. I want you to loaf and rest.”

He stood and extended his hand, and she clasped hold. He lifted her to her feet, and their proximity set sparks to flying. They both sighed with pleasure.

“Will you answer a question for me?” she said.

“If I can.”

“Whose gown am I wearing? Your housemaids offered me several

garments they claimed to have dug out of a trunk up in the attic.”

“This has only been my home for a few months, so I can’t imagine whose clothes they are.”

“They aren’t any of your mistresses, are they?” She was fairly certain they weren’t. With their long sleeves, high collars, and muted colors, they weren’t the kind a slattern would choose. Not if Isabella Darling was an example. “If you’ve attired me in a doxy’s castoffs, I might have to murder you in your sleep.”

“I don’t know whose they are. I swear.” He bent down and kissed her again. “I have many faults, but I try not to ever be an idiot.”

The comment made her smile. “I’ll keep that in mind. Have you ever brought any of your trollops here?”

“No. You’re the very first one.”

She blanched with offense and was about to scold him, but he was grinning again.

“You’re teasing me,” she said.

“Yes, and you are the sole person—male or female—I’ve ever brought with me. With your remark about your wardrobe, I’m remembering that I should buy you some things of your own. Jackson too. I can’t have the two of you traipsing around in rags, like beggars at the poorhouse.”

“You’re not buying me clothes. The items from the attic are fine for now. I don’t need anything else.”

“You’re wearing a grey gown, Hannah, and I hate it. You look dowdy and plain, and—with your green eyes—you’d be magnificent in a bright emerald. Or maybe a darker red. I’ll think about it and let you know.”

“You can’t buy me clothes!” she insisted more sternly, but he shook his head with exasperation.

“I won’t listen to you when you’re being silly, and besides, what sane female would quarrel about receiving a new dress?”

“If you start showering me with expensive gifts, people will say it’s a reward because I’m loose with my favors.”

“Are you loose with them? Tell me you are! I just love a woman who can’t behave herself.”

“Would you be serious?”

“I’m serious as an apoplexy. I love wicked tarts. The worse the



better.”

“And I am not one and never will be, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“My hopes are always *up*,” he said. “After you spend a bit of time with me, who can predict what we’ll discover about you?”

He linked their fingers, as if they were adolescent sweethearts, and he led her from the room, not caring if the affectionate gesture was witnessed by others. Apparently, she didn’t care either.

She couldn’t imagine *not* being close to him. She would revel with him, and if any of the servants grumbled, she didn’t have to pay attention. After all, once she departed Marston Manor, she’d never see any of them again.

She would relax and be pampered. She would have a luxurious holiday, and when it was over, she’d walk away without a single regret.

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Jackson watched from the corral as Lord Marston rolled off with Hannah in his carriage.

Initially, he hadn’t liked Marston, having assumed he was merely a pompous roué, like Jackson’s father had been, like his mother’s paramours had been. But a few days earlier, he’d spied on Marston when he’d given Hannah a ride home. From how fondly Marston had been gazing at Hannah, Jackson was convinced he’d never hurt her.

Then and there, Jackson had decided to accumulate more information about Marston. He’d befriended one of Marston’s outriders, and two of his stable boys. They’d confirmed that he was a grand fellow: kind, patient, and loyal to a fault. He liked the ladies a little too much, but that was to be expected from a man of his station.

When the shop had burned, when Hannah had been stunned and bereft and incapable of determining a path forward, Jackson had fetched Marston to take charge of the situation. He had no qualms about doing it, but Marston would have to behave as Jackson planned.

Lord Marston was genuinely wealthy. Not bogus wealthy as his mother’s acquaintances had pretended to be. His servants had verified his financial status, and as Jackson’s mother had counselled, it was smart to glom onto a rich man.

Marston could fix Hannah’s problems, and in the process, he might assist Jackson too, but Hannah would come first. Marston could flirt

with her, could tuck her away at his posh mansion in the country, but there would have to be promises made and promises kept. Otherwise, Marston would have to leave her alone, and Jackson had all sorts of ways to manipulate him.

He'd learned to protect the women in his life. For most of it, there had just been his mother. Now there was Hannah. And Rebecca too. The minute he could finagle Marston, he would ask if they could bring Rebecca to Marston Manor. Jackson would get her away from her mother and stepfather, then he'd be sure both his sisters were safe.

He'd use Lord Marston by coercing him to provide what they required, and the top-lofty oaf would never realize how slyly Jackson had obtained exactly what he wanted.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I received a letter from Rebecca.”

“Really? Here at Marston Manor? How did she find us?”

“I had some London mail forwarded to me.”

Hannah handed the letter to Jackson, watching as he read it.

They were in the sitting room in her bedchamber at Marston. He was pacing, eager to get back outside. He’d made several friends among the stable boys, and he was engaging in antics he’d never had the chance to enjoy in the city. The other boys were in awe of him, and he’d become their leader.

She was seated at a table by the window, sifting through the mail that had been delivered from town. On the morning Hunter had whisked her away from London, he’d informed the proprietors of the tea house that—should anyone inquire as to her whereabouts—she’d be at his estate in the country.

Her whole street had been in such disarray that she was surprised and grateful they’d remembered.

There were missives from acquaintances who’d learned about the fire and who were concerned over her condition. But there were numerous bills too, as well as nervous comments from suppliers and tradesmen who were wondering about goods that had been destroyed in the inferno.

It was a humiliating reminder that she didn’t have the money to pay what she owed, and she had to write to her attorney, Mr. Thumberton, and ask his advice as to what she should do. In light of the calamity, might he be able to slip some funds out of her dowry to square her debts?

The large sum was held in trust for the husband she was supposed to wed in the far-off future, but she needed it a little earlier than that and without the husband being attached who might fritter it away.

The strangest message had been from the tea house proprietor who’d thought she’d like to know that an insurance agent had stopped by. He’d assessed the damage to her shop and had been overheard to say that an

indemnity disbursement for the full amount of the losses would be posted shortly.

Since she'd never purchased an insurance policy on the building or the contents—she couldn't afford it—she had no idea who the man was or why he'd have been surveying her property. She figured the tea house owner had been mistaken, that the agent had been talking about someone else.

“Rebecca sounds very unhappy,” Jackson said.

“Yes, and she wants to travel to London to stay with us. I can't bear to tell her we're not even in town, and I have no lodging there.”

“Maybe we could have her come here. I doubt Lord Marston would care.”

“Her mother wouldn't have allowed her to visit me in London, so Amelia would never agree to a visit at Marston Manor. Lord Marston declined to betroth himself to Rebecca, and Amelia will fume forever over that snub.”

“You like Lord Marston, don't you?”

“Currently, he's behaving like the most gallant of champions, so yes, I like him.”

Jackson stared at Hannah in that intense way he had, and he said, “I was curious as to what sort of person he'd turn out to be, but I've decided he's a grand fellow.”

“He can be very grand—when he's not being horrid.”

It was late in the afternoon, the place quiet as the servants had tea and rested a bit before the push began to serve supper.

Because she didn't have any fancy attire, and because it was just the three of them—Hunter, Jackson, and herself—they didn't dress for meals. She felt as if she should be changing her clothes though. The manor was so exquisite that the plain gowns the maids had found in the attic didn't suit the surroundings.

She was an honored guest, and with Hunter showering her with attention, she might have been the lady of the house. It was incredibly presumptuous to picture it like that, but she couldn't tamp down the sense that she'd arrived precisely where she belonged.

Never in a thousand years could she have predicted her rescue by Hunter Stone, that she'd be ensconced in a luxurious bedchamber and prancing about on his arm as if they were a devoted couple. It was

almost as if they were newlyweds.

She had to admit they were a handsome couple. When they toured the neighborhood, people smiled and nodded when they went by, as if they approved of Hunter's choice of bride.

It was stirring her arrogance, making her dream about what might be possible with him, but that was dangerous contemplation. They were trapped in a perfect bubble, where the outside world couldn't intrude. While scandal typically followed him like a cloud, it had been temporarily obscured, so she kept forgetting what he was really like.

"I have a question," Jackson said. "It will seem odd, so please don't think I'm mad."

"I hope I have an answer, and I won't think you're mad. I promise."

"If Lord Marston proposed marriage to you, would you consider accepting? I realize his father is pressuring him to wed, and he previously thought you'd been offered to him. If he asked you, how would you reply?"

She pondered her response, worried over how candid she should be. The door was closed and they were alone, so she said, "I'll tell you a secret about him and me, but you have to swear you won't mention it to anyone."

"I won't; I swear."

"He *did* propose to me at Parkhurst."

"Then why aren't you engaged to him right about now?"

"I refused him."

Jackson frowned. "Why would you have?"

"It's complicated."

"I don't see how it could be. Just imagine if you were his wife. It wouldn't matter that your shop had burned to the ground. He's so wealthy that all your problems would be solved."

"Not *all* of them, I don't suppose."

He was gazing at her with such perplexity, and she hated to disappoint him. In the past few days, he and Hunter had bonded, and Jackson's admiration bordered on hero-worship.

With his being raised by a mother who'd thrived in the demimonde, he had a peculiar view of life and High Society. Many of his opinions and attitudes matched Hunter's exactly. Neither of them disdained dubious conduct, including necessary violence, duplicitous plotting, and

various forms of trickery in dicey situations.

They knew many of the same people too, and often, when he and Hunter were chatting about London, Hannah felt completely irrelevant.

"He's a better man than I initially deemed him to be," Jackson said.

"In some ways, yes. But in other ways, he's quite dreadful."

"In what ways?"

"We probably shouldn't discuss them. It wouldn't be fitting."

"I'm not a baby, Hannah. I'm aware of his fondness for doxies."

She was sad that he was so young, but so jaded. "Well, then, you must comprehend why I'd be hesitant."

"Men look at amorous relationships differently than women."

"Yes, but I don't believe they *should* look at them differently. I believe marriage vows are important, and adultery is very offensive. I could never wed a cad who would constantly stray. The notion is extremely distasteful to me."

"What if he renounced them? What would you think then?"

"It's a very pretty fantasy, but it would never happen. Lord Marston revels in his dissolute existence, and he enjoys the tarts who entertain him. He's happy with how he carries on, and he has no desire to change his habits."

"So...if he proposed again, you'd still be opposed?"

"He won't propose a second time. He's very proud and I rejected him. He would never beg a female to have him."

He smiled slyly, as if he had a scheme brewing, and she would have scolded him for being a pest, but a maid knocked and peeked in.

"Miss Graves, Lord Marston would like you to join him down in the front parlor."

"I'll be right there, but were you apprised if I'm going on another carriage ride? Shall I bring my shawl and bonnet?"

"You're not going for a ride. He has a surprise for you."

"Oh, dear," Hannah murmured. "That could mean anything—for good or ill."

"I'm sure you'll be delighted," the girl said. "May I escort you down?"

"No. I need a minute to tidy up, and I can find my own way."

The girl left, and once it was quiet, Hannah asked Jackson, "Do you have any idea what this is about?"

"No, but he's rich and generous. If he gives you an expensive gift, don't you dare refuse it."

Hannah scowled. "It wouldn't be appropriate for him to give me a gift."

"Who would know or care?"

"I would know and you would know too. I don't want to set a bad example."

"Trust me, Hannah, you could never dim my esteem. In any circumstance, you would never make the wrong choice. You're entirely too moralistic."

"You mention my having moral tendencies as if it's a failing."

"You don't even have a dress to call your own, so you shouldn't be so particular about what you'll accept and what you won't. It's a lesson I learned from my mother. She never had two pennies to rub together, and she claimed you should let a wealthy fellow open his purse whenever he's inclined to share."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I may be years younger than you, but I understand a lot more than you about how the world actually works."

"When a man like Lord Marston tosses out pricey gifts to a female, he expects boons in return. There's a name for women who are ensnared in that sort of lurid bargain, and I never intend to become one of them. It's no mystery what he's seeking from me, and I would never lower myself to supply it."

"We'll see how it ends," he said, as if he hoped she'd shuck off her ethical leanings, as if she *should* shuck them off.

Before she could argue about it, he sauntered out, and she was alone.

To her great annoyance, she hurried into the dressing room so she could study herself in the mirror. She checked her hair and clothes, anxious to look smart when she went downstairs, and she caught herself wishing she had a few gowns that were more flattering.

She'd met Isabella Darling, so she was cognizant of the type of wardrobe that appealed to Hunter Stone. He'd previously told her she was dowdy in grey, but she was wearing another grey gown, and she couldn't bear to have him think she was dowdy. She yearned for him to think she was elegantly garbed, and her desire to please him had blossomed to a hazardous level.

He was a sophisticated scoundrel, and he seduced women for sport, so he could easily tempt her. Her calamitous situation was skewing her perception of how they were connected.

She constantly imbued him with traits he didn't possess, and if she wasn't cautious, she'd land herself in a jam she couldn't repair. It was horrendously shocking for her to have isolated herself with him at his rural estate. If her conduct was ever exposed, her reputation would never recover, but despite the peril, she wasn't in any rush to depart.

She decided her condition couldn't be improved, and she left her suite and headed for the stairs. She strolled slowly, loving the old mansion more and more. Every time she wandered down a hall, she noticed something new that delighted her. The Stone family had been excellent caretakers, and she suffered a twinge of envy over how she'd like to be Mrs. Hunter Stone and the pretty house hers someday.

As she reached the foyer, a crowd of servants had gathered. It was mostly the housemaids, and they were peeking into the front parlor, ooing and aahing over whatever they were observing inside the room.

What on earth was Hunter about to show her? Apparently, it would be grand and inappropriate, and as she neared the doorway, she was almost tiptoeing with alarm.

The housemaids stepped away to let her pass, and she walked into a collection of beautiful clothing. There was a bit of everything draped across the sofas and chairs: gowns, slippers, bonnets, fans, shawls, nightclothes, cloaks. The array of colors and fabrics was stunning, as if a purchaser had ambled through a dressmaker's shop and picked the items that would most tantalize the senses.

"There you are," Hunter said. "Come in, come in."

He was seated in the corner, on an ornate chair, so he appeared to be a benevolent king. He waved for her to approach, the whole scenario so bizarre and exaggerated that she wondered if she should bow down.

"What is all this?" she inquired, although she'd figured it out on her own.

"You lost your belongings in the fire, so you're in dire straits. As for myself, I can't abide a drab female. I won't have you roaming about like a grumpy governess."

"I distinctly remember telling you not to buy me any clothes."

"Yes, I remember it too, but when you're being silly, there's no rule



that requires me to listen.”

He motioned to the butler, and the man shooed the maids away and shut the door. There was a petite, foreign-looking woman huddled behind him, and two other women stood with her.

“This is Madame LaFarge,” he said, “and she’s brought her most trusted assistants to help us today. She is London’s premier modiste, and I am a regular customer.”

At hearing the woman introduced, Hannah blanched. Madame LaFarge designed for the richest, most notorious ladies in the kingdom, and her creations were the talk of the town in certain elevated circles. She was fabulously expensive, and only the most affluent patrons could afford to hire her.

She was busy and fussy, and the fact that she’d dashed to the country, practically at the drop of a hat, was testament to how much money he likely spent on his doxies in her shop. Evidently, he included Hannah in a group with Miss Darling, and she was embarrassed to the core of her being.

Madame LaFarge was staring with anticipation, clearly expecting her to leap into the excitement of the moment. She was eager to aid him as he selected outfits for his latest trollop, that *trollop* being Hannah.

For some reason, Hannah felt as if she might burst into tears. Too much had happened recently, so her nerves were raw. She understood that he viewed this as a magnanimous gesture, that she was supposed to gush and fawn over him for being so generous, but she wasn’t a fool.

Enormous strings were attached to this sort of gift, and she couldn’t pay the price he would ultimately extract.

“Would you excuse me?” she said.

“No.” He frowned. “And what’s the matter? Don’t you dare be a grouch about this. I’ll be so annoyed if you are.”

“Sometimes, I’m convinced I know you so well, but other times—like now—I’m not sure we’re members of the same species.”

“You’re being ridiculous, and you need to calm down. The Madame came all the way from town, and she has several garments you can have today. We can order the rest. I won’t let you decline what I’ve offered.”

He flashed a steely glower, visually warning her to behave, but the problem for him was that she never followed commands that were stupid or wrong.

“Much to my regret,” she said, “I just can’t participate.”

She whipped away and stumbled out, and thankfully, the butler had chased the maids away, so the foyer was empty. She raced up to her bedchamber, and she went through the sitting room and bedroom, until she was tucked away in the dressing room.

She plopped down on the stool at the dressing table, and she assessed her reflection in the mirror.

She shouldn’t have traveled to Marston with him. When he’d put her in his coach and had whisked her out of the city, she’d been too distressed to argue over their destination. But she shouldn’t have tarried with him.

She’d allowed him to bowl her over, and she didn’t possess the strength of will to fight off his determined advance. She *wanted* the relationship he was pursuing. She *wanted* the pretty clothes and the easy life he’d furnished at Marston, one where she didn’t have to fret about the slightest issue.

She had to leave; there was no other option. And she had to return to Parkhurst. There was no option about that either. She had to depart in the morning, but the notion of never seeing him again was too disturbing, and her level of upset only underscored how reckless she’d been.

“What to do? What to do?” she murmured to herself.

The answer to that question was obvious. She had to save herself by going home. The sooner the better.

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Hunter watched Hannah storm out, and he rolled his eyes with exasperation. The woman was an enigma. She didn’t think or act like any female he’d ever encountered. She didn’t have a penny or pair of shoes to her name, and she was content to gad about in hand-me-downs from the attic.

He was used to women who greedily glommed onto him for what he could provide to them, so Hannah’s attitude left him bewildered. What type of female scoffed at a gift?

He glanced at Madame LaFarge and said, “I’ll be right back, and she’ll be with me. She’s stubborn, but she’s in a desperate predicament. If she won’t pick what she likes, *I* will pick for her.”

Most people assumed he was a lazy scapegrace, but he could accomplish amazing feats when he was motivated. Normally, he wasn't motivated by much, so he always appeared slothful.

He'd relished the chance to purchase some clothes for her, and he'd been smugly delighted with the treat he'd planned, but he should have realized she'd toss it in his face. She was so obstinate, and he truly couldn't deduce why he was bothering with her.

Yet as swiftly as the thought arose, he reminded himself of why: She'd wedged herself into his life in a manner that seemed fated to occur.

They'd spent several days at Marston, a spot he hadn't been particularly thrilled to inherit. When title had passed, he'd been a tad irked. He hadn't done anything to deserve it, and ownership had merely delivered increased obligations he hadn't been eager to assume.

Now though, after exploring the property with her, he felt as if she was supposed to be there with him, as if they might have been newlyweds. He'd been ensnared by her, and he wasn't in any hurry to free himself.

He stomped out to the foyer, and he didn't inquire as to where she was. He figured she'd be hiding in her bedchamber, and he didn't pause to wonder what he'd do if she'd locked him out. He simply marched to her door and spun the knob.

He found her in the dressing room. She was seated on the stool at the dressing table, moping, as if she'd just lost her last friend. He was rattled by her woeful condition, and while he'd intended to bully her into behaving as he was demanding, he couldn't force himself to be harsh.

"Hannah," he said, more tenderly than he'd meant to, "what's wrong? Tell me."

She glared at him over her shoulder. "Go away."

"No."

"Can't I have one second of privacy without you blustering in and lording yourself over me?"

"No," he repeated.

"I should have locked my door."

"I'd have kicked it in."

"Ooh, you are too obnoxious for words."

"I've often heard that." He wandered over and leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. "Most women in your situation would be glad to have some new clothes."

"I told you not to buy me any."

"Which part has enraged you the most? The fact that you don't want any? Or the fact that I've disobeyed your grand self and bought them anyway?"

"If I accept them, there will be all kinds of strings attached."

"Are you sure about that? Can't I just give them to you because I'm a big-hearted person?"

"You find it amusing to tease me, but we both know you'll expect something drastic in exchange."

"Please advise me as to what, in your infinite wisdom, you presume it to be."

"I don't have the sordid vocabulary to describe it, and I shouldn't have let you transport me to Marston. I need to leave."

The announcement was like a punch in the gut.

"Where would you go?" he asked.

"To Parkhurst."

"Absolutely not. You're not leaving Marston, and you're not heading to Parkhurst. I won't permit you to return there until we've decided how you're to deal with your deranged relatives."

"Well, I can't continue to tarry with you."

"Why not? Because I'd like to buy you some clothes? You've forced me to declare that you are being positively unhinged about this. You should have some pretty apparel of your very own. Why are you working so hard to irritate me?"

"I don't trust you."

"That is very wise. You shouldn't trust me."

"If you're so keen to waste a small fortune on me, you must have ulterior motives."

"That's a wise assessment too. I always have ulterior motives. In this case, they're especially selfish ones. I can't stand seeing you in grey and brown. Why can't you wear emerald or sapphire instead—and make me happy?"

"Why would you care if I make you happy? I'm struggling to understand what's happening here."

“What’s *happening* is that I like you very much, and you’re down on your luck. I am very rich, and I’m trying to improve your situation.”

“To what end? Can you explain the conclusion you envision?”

“Must there be an explanation?”

She stared down at her hands and murmured, “I guess not.”

He dipped in and kissed her, and she moaned with despair, as if he brought her great pain.

“Stop being so suspicious,” he said. “Come downstairs and pick out some gowns.”

“I could never pay you back. Not in a thousand years.”

“Have I mentioned one word about you paying me back?”

“No.”

“Then let me be generous. It’s my nature.”

She studied him, hunting for a candor he rarely exhibited, but her search was pointless. She could never win any battles with him.

Finally, she said, “Swear to me there are no strings.”

“I swear.”

He wasn’t serious though. If she grew fond, if she began to feel beholden, he wouldn’t protest. He would take full advantage, but not because he expected a reward. No, it would be because he was a cad who never refused what was freely offered.

“If I came down,” she said, “what would I have to do?”

“You’ll simply look at the ladies’ creations. If you like any of them, we’ll keep them. They might tailor them with a bit of hemming or stitching, then they’ll be on their way. If you don’t like any of it, they’ll pack up and go. I won’t invite them again.”

“Is it up to me? I can determine if I like anything.”

“Of course it’s up to you.”

He told the lie with a straight face. Though it sounded odd, he liked picking out clothes for women, and he was one of the Madame’s best customers. He’d already selected several items for her, but he’d left some choices for her, so she could have some fun.

If she’d just climb down off her high horse and quit being such a pest, they could have a pleasant afternoon of shopping.

“All right,” she ultimately said. “I’ll join you, and I’m sorry I’ve been such a nuisance. You’ve been so kind to me, and my response has been to constantly act like a shrew.”

“You haven’t been *much* of a shrew.”

She chuckled at that. “I’ll remember to be more grateful.”

“Good. I hate to see you so sad. There’s no reason to be. Everything is working out fine, don’t you think? We’ll get your life squared away and your problems solved. I’ll help you.” He kissed her again, both of them sighing with delight. “Let’s start by having you appropriately attired. I need you smiling. When you don’t, it’s apparent that I’m failing as your host.”

“I will smile more often. I promise.”

“That’s my girl. By the time supper rolls around, I’d like to have you seated at the dining table, dressed like a princess.”

“I don’t know if I can manage the standard of princess, but I will try to reach the level of contented young lady.”

He lifted her to her feet, and they walked out. She was in front of him, so she couldn’t observe his smirk.

He was a master at convincing females to give him what he wanted. Hannah Graves was no different. Who could guess what she’d wind up surrendering in the end?

Whatever she eventually relinquished to him, he would gladly accept it.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight to you too.”

Hannah stood with Hunter in the front foyer of the manor. Jackson had just headed up to bed, so they were alone, except for a sleepy footman who was standing over by the door. Hunter waved to him and sent him up to bed too.

It was the end of another perfect day. They seemed to roll by in a quiet wave, so she was never forced to take stock and get moving. She’d intended to leave Marston—and Hunter—forever, but she hadn’t.

Instead, she’d let him purchase a new wardrobe for her, and she was strutting about in her pretty clothes and making him happy, as he’d requested.

They’d been to the village for a party on the village green. It was held in honor of one of Hunter’s ancestors who’d been a famous buccaneer. The community used his antics as an excuse to celebrate.

People had heard Hunter was staying at the manor, and they’d been delighted to finally meet him. He’d been carefully assessed, with villagers anxious to discover what sort of man he’d turn out to be, and she supposed they hadn’t been disappointed.

He’d been his usual charming self, had drunk ale with the men and had danced with as many of the ladies as he could. He’d bought all the pies at the table the women from the church had set up as a fundraiser, paying double the price. It had endeared him to the whole town.

As to herself, she’d noticed a not-so-sly evaluation occurring. She was a curiosity, and a few brave souls had dared to inquire whether she was Lord Marston’s fiancée. When she’d admitted she wasn’t, they could barely conceal their shock.

Her situation was very scandalous. After all, she was ensconced in a bachelor’s home and no parent or chaperone had accompanied her. But it didn’t matter what the Marston neighbors thought of her. She’d depart soon, and she’d never see any of them again, but she tried to live in a moral way, and she hated to be stirring a low opinion.

"I had a grand evening," she told him.

"I did too—much to my surprise."

"Everyone liked you."

He chuckled. "Well, why wouldn't they? I'm a likeable fellow. I keep telling you that."

"Yes, you're eminently likeable, but that's all the compliments you'll drag out of me. I won't inflate your ego more than it already is."

He linked their fingers and pulled her close so he could kiss her. It was becoming a habit with him. For such a masculine man, he was extremely affectionate, always touching her, whispering in her ear, sitting nearer than was proper.

"I don't want to go to bed," he said. "My energy is jangled from the noise and excitement in the village. I can't bear for the night to be over."

"Neither can I."

"Will you have a glass of wine with me?"

"I'd like that."

She should have refused, but as with every other facet of her odd circumstance, she couldn't decline his invitation. She'd been entrapped by him, to where fetters might have been locked around her ankles to hold her in place. She wasn't strong enough to cut them loose and free herself.

They walked to a rear parlor that looked out over the park and was very secluded. If Jackson or a servant stumbled down the stairs, it wasn't likely they'd be discovered.

She sat on a sofa, while he poured their wine and handed a glass to her, then he went over to the window and peered outside. The moon was full and shining down so brightly that everything shimmered in a soothing silver color. He didn't light a candle; they didn't need one.

They sipped their drinks, and it was a companionable silence. After a bit, he glanced over and said, "I like it here more than I suspected I would. It could be a haven for me, I think. I hadn't expected to feel like this."

"Didn't you grow up in the country? Aren't you partial to rural living? Or have you always resided in London?"

"Yes, I grew up in the country, with my brothers, Warwick and Sheridan. We had an...interesting childhood." It took him an eternity to settle on the word *interesting*.



"That's a peculiar description of your upbringing. How was it interesting?"

"My mother died when we were little, and my father wasn't exactly a model parent. He gamboled in London with his friends and mistresses, so my brothers and I were raised by servants who had no ability to control us. We were so wild."

"When did you join the army?"

"At sixteen. I was anxious to escape where I was, and I assumed it would be a good path for me."

"Was it?"

"I liked the travel and adventure, but the fun vanished after I was wounded. I probably shouldn't have survived. The doctors insisted it was a miracle, but I was simply too stubborn to perish."

"Where were you wounded?"

"In the Americas, fighting the natives."

"No, I mean *where* on your torso."

"In my stomach. An arrow sliced clear through me. Then it became infected."

"Do you have a scar?"

"Yes, on both sides of my body."

"Will you show it to me someday?"

"I can show you now—if you promise you won't faint."

"I won't faint. I promise."

He came over to where she was still seated on the sofa, and he shed his coat, then tugged his shirt out of his trousers. He turned slightly so the moonlight illuminated him better, and she could see the scar. It was a perfect circle, about waist high, just below his ribcage.

She brazenly traced a finger across it, finding the skin rough and jagged. He spun to display his back, and there was another circle, again at his waist and below his ribs. She touched it too, lingering, laying a palm over the spot and offering a quick prayer of thanks that he'd lived through the ordeal.

The moment was outrageously intimate, making it seem as if they were even more closely connected.

"What is your opinion?" he said, a teasing tone in his voice. He stepped away and went back to the window. "It's my one and only claim to brave conduct. Have I astonished you?"

“Yes, definitely. We Brits send young men off to fight in foreign locales, but I’ve never actually been confronted with the consequences of a man’s army service. I’m speechless.”

“All these years later, it doesn’t look very bad, but when it occurred, it was quite gripping. And, of course, I was a long way from home. It was terrifying, and it changed my attitude about what mattered.”

“What did you decide mattered?”

“I have a fortune with which to enjoy myself, so I started to focus on things that give me pleasure.”

“Are you telling me that your hedonistic embrace of vice and debauchery is a reaction to your nearly dying? It’s not merely because you’re a wastrel at heart?”

“I’m pretending for you that I have stellar motives for my antics. Have I impressed you with my story?”

“You always impress me,” she said.

“I can’t believe you admitted it.”

He grinned and tucked in his shirt, then he stared out again. There was a new energy in the air, and a wave of unuttered comments were swirling. Any profound declaration could have been shared, but when he finally spoke, she had to bite down a chuckle.

Men and women were such different creatures, and her thought processes would never align with his.

“I wonder if any of my acquaintances in London have missed me,” he said. “When we left for the country, I penned a note to my father, so he’d know where I was, but I didn’t inform anyone else. I have such a regular routine in the city that there are probably rumors I’ve passed away.”

“I’m sure they’re bereft over your absence.” She was thinking particularly of Isabella Darling. How would the horrid shrew respond if she ever learned that Hannah had been with him at Marston?

“I refuse to consider that no one’s noticed I’m gone,” he said.

“You’re like a spoiled toddler, Hunter. You want everyone to dote on you.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s lovely to be coddled. Don’t deny it.”

He was quiet, the minutes ticking by, and she was on pins and needles, speculating over what might transpire.

“We have to repair your life,” he said. “Since we arrived at Marston,

we haven't talked about what you'd like to have happen."

"This has been a strange episode, hasn't it? It seems as if the outside world has faded away, and I have no commitments or obligations."

"I feel exactly the same, that I can loaf and play and not fret about tomorrow."

"Reality will have to seep in one of these days."

"I've never been a huge fan of *reality*," he said. "I like to follow my own rules."

"I've realized that about you."

"It's much more fun than having preachers or society directing my route, and my father never demanded any moral behavior. My brothers and I carried on like a pack of wolf pups, with no supervision and no constraints."

"It explains why you're so unruly."

"I'm slowing down in my old age though. I get bored with debauchery and tired of my idiotic companions."

"You're only thirty, so you're not old, and if you're bored and tired, it's because you revel like a barbarian."

"Perhaps that's my problem. I revel too excessively."

He pushed away from the window to snuggle next to her on the sofa. He linked their fingers again, and they shifted so they were very close together, their lips inches apart, and there was a gleam in his eye that she hadn't observed prior.

"People were gossiping about you in the village," he said.

"I heard them. They're shocked that I'm staying with you."

"Normally, I wouldn't care about their provincial attitudes, but I don't like to have them denigrating you."

"I'm not too keen on it either."

"I have an idea of how we can fix it."

"From how you're staring, I'm almost afraid to have you tell me what it is."

He snorted with amusement. "I mentioned this once before, and I'm stunned to mention it again, but we should marry."

Her breath hitched in her chest. Ever since they'd been at Parkhurst, she'd been wishing he'd propose a second time, but she'd persuaded herself he never would. She must have looked perplexed over what her reply should be, because he said, "If you wed me, *I* would own

Parkhurst rather than you, so I would have the right and duty to deal with your relatives.”

“It might be worth it merely to have that burden lifted off my shoulders.”

“I’d receive your dowry money too. You could have some of it and use it to rebuild your shop.”

“You’d let me keep on in trade? Really?”

“I don’t imagine the Earth would stop spinning if you did. If you weren’t enthused about re-starting it in town, maybe you could attempt it here in the village. What with the coaching inn and the traffic it generates, it’s a commercial center for the area, and there are plenty of visitors on market day. You might do very well with it.”

Her jaw dropped with astonishment. “That is such a modern notion, and I view you as such a stuffy, traditional male. I can’t believe you suggested it.”

“You and Sybil Jones are rubbing off on me.” He shrugged, abashed, as if he was embarrassed.

“What brought this on?” she asked. “You proposed to me at Parkhurst, but I was certain you’d never try it again. What spurred you to it?”

“I guess I’m feeling nostalgic. I had such a lovely evening, and I can’t picture us ever parting. Can you? I mean, at some point we have to leave Marston. I would return to London and you’d go...where?”

“I suppose to Parkhurst.”

“If we were in London, it wouldn’t be appropriate for us to continue on like this, and I’d have to begin a marital search in earnest. After the debacle at Parkhurst, I told my father that I wouldn’t consider other candidates, but I was being a brat. I’ve never cared much about my position, but I can’t imperil an earldom by never siring any children. It’s probably a step too reckless—even for me.”

“I can’t see you strolling through drawing rooms and chasing debutantes.”

“Perish the thought.” He gave a mock shudder. “But if you and I married...”

The prospect dangled between them, and apparently, she was a very greedy person. She yearned to latch onto him, but he came with some very heavy baggage that was too weighty for her to carry.

At the moment, he was suffering a bout of melancholia, so he'd tossed matrimony onto the table, but she wasn't convinced he was sincere. She struggled to envision what it would be like to be his wife, but she couldn't fathom it.

She'd like to assume it would be like the period they'd spent at Marston, but he had an entire life in town that he enjoyed very much, and he'd never abandon it for her. Oh, he might tarry in the country with her for some weeks or months, but he would swiftly be chomping at the bit, eager to be in the city where he could wallow in the vices that had always enticed him.

If he returned to London, she wouldn't accompany him. Would she dawdle at Marston alone? Would she worry and wonder how he was staying busy?

Well, she *knew* how he'd occupy his time, and she'd be driven insane from pondering the beautiful trollops who would be a temptation he couldn't resist.

Yet if she didn't wed him, what was her plan? Her only option was to slither to Parkhurst. Once she arrived, she'd have to seize control of the estate from Winston, but even if she could win the battle, he'd sneakily undermine her orders and decisions.

In the end, she'd have to grow a spine and evict him and Amelia, but she simply couldn't bear to contemplate the difficulty involved.

A stronger woman might have marched home and taken the gloves off to wrestle over the issues that plagued her, but she wasn't a fighter. Wouldn't it be a relief to have Hunter handle it? If he was her husband, she could shuck off her responsibilities and let them fall to him. She suspected he'd revel in the brawls that would ensue.

Ooh, how she wished she had an older, wiser female to advise her. If she'd been in London, she'd have visited Sybil Jones. Miss Jones was friendly with him, and no doubt, she could shed light on what kind of man he was deep down.

If he offered promises, if he spoke vows, was there even the tiniest chance he would keep any of them?

"You're thinking too hard," he said, "and when you do, you make ridiculous choices."

"I'm trying to figure out how our life would unfold if I was your wife."

"If we've come that far, then I'm definitely persuading you. You're aware that I deem you to be a complete milksop, so I should have this settled in the next minute or so."

She jabbed him with her elbow. "You shouldn't insult me when you're proposing marriage. It won't help to get you what you want."

"I always get what I want."

"This is where I find myself hesitating. I've never understood this fascination you have for me. Why would *I* be the one you pick?"

"You've already deduced why: It would save me from chasing debutantes."

She clucked her tongue with offense. "You have to provide me with a better reason. Aren't you the great Romeo who constantly charms women? Why would I feel special in even the slightest way? You have to make me think I'm marvelous and unique and that you absolutely *must* have me as your bride."

He traced a finger across her face, her nose, her lips, then he cupped her chin in his palm. The moon was shining in, casting magical shadows around the room, and his blue eyes glittered with an emotion she couldn't name.

"If I wed you," he eventually said, "I'm betting I'd be happy forever."

The comment was so dear that her heart pounded under her ribs. She shook her head and drew away from him. "Don't tell me things like that. It has me anxious to throw myself into your arms and beg you to have me."

"From the moment we met, it seemed as if Fate was pulling us together, so how can I let you go? Should I return to town without you? Could you bear to never see me again?"

"No, I couldn't bear it."

"Neither could I, so where does that leave us? We should wed, and we should do it right away. We'll unravel the details later on."

"What if you hated being a husband?" she asked.

"What if I loved it?" he countered. "What if I was the best husband in history?"

She chuckled. "What if *I* hated being a wife?"

"You wouldn't hate it. You're exactly the kind of female who should have a home and husband of her own. Why not have it be me and

Marston?"

"Would we live here?"

As she posed the question, she blanched. Was she truly considering the notion? After all the years she'd shunned matrimony, was she prepared to toss off her reservations and forge ahead?

It appeared she was.

She wasn't sure what was different. Perhaps it was the dark parlor and quiet conversation. Or perhaps it was his talking about the pain of their separating. Could she stand to never be with him like this in the future?

No. He'd become important to her, and she couldn't envision her world without him in it.

"You'd have to promise me one thing," she said. "You'd have to promise, and you'd have to mean it. This is the problem I'm having. You've been swept away by the crazed idea that you should swiftly proceed, but you can't have fully assessed the ramifications."

"It's not swift or crazed. When did we discuss it at Parkhurst? A month ago? More than that? And I'm thirty. I'm not a green boy who doesn't know his own mind. I must choose a bride very soon. Why shouldn't it be you?"

"But *me*? Are you certain? I'm so afraid you haven't thought this through. What if I agree, then you stumble on a dozen girls who are prettier and richer than me? If you ever regretted picking me, I'd be crushed."

He gazed at her and said, "I could never regret marrying you. I've never met a woman with whom I was so compatible, and I've met a *lot* of women. I'm a good judge about these issues."

"You just mentioned the dilemma that's vexing me. It's your doxies and you being an unrepentant cad. You've told me several times that you relish being a bachelor."

"You're correct, but I'm not a child anymore. I need to begin acting like an adult."

"Yes, but I would expect the marriage vows to matter, and I'd demand you abide by them. You couldn't have mistresses. You couldn't dabble with slatterns. You couldn't carouse with your friends, like that odious Mr. Carew, where loose tarts were constantly available to tempt you."

She'd leveled numerous ultimatums, and his response had her laughing.

"You think Nate Carew is odious?"

"Yes, and don't change the subject. Marriage to me would involve such a huge alteration of your circumstances. It's why I'm wary. I can't picture you being able to behave yourself. It's easy to promise, but it's quite a bit harder to follow through."

"I understand that."

"If you had affairs and paramours, I'd be devastated, and it would destroy the affection I feel for you."

"You're feeling some affection? It's a start, I guess. I don't suppose it will take much more effort on my part to wear you down."

He stood and went back to the window, and for an eternity, he stared outside. She couldn't imagine what he was pondering, and she figured, by pointing out the obvious, he'd have recognized his folly and would retract his words, and she couldn't decide how she viewed that prospect.

She might have been two separate people. One half of her realized she was mad to consider it. The other half was sure, if she was his wife, she'd be glad every minute. Which half would win out in the end?

Finally, he walked over to the liquor tray, and he poured himself a whiskey. He downed the contents in a quick swallow, as if bolstering his courage. Then he came over and dropped to a knee, and it was thrilling and terrifying to observe. There was only one reason a man put himself in that position: to propose.

He clasped her hand in his and said, "I swear to you, Hannah Graves, that I will give up my bachelor ways. I will forsake my wild habits and my disgusting friends and my debauched trollops. I swear about the trollops most of all. I will speak the vows, and I will stick to them. I will never betray you and I will never stray. I will never disgrace or shame you, and I will try my best to be the husband you deserve. Will you marry me?"

It was a remarkable speech, and it brought a sting of tears to her eyes. "How could I possibly say *no*?"

"You shouldn't say it. This is the perfect conclusion for both of us. Take a chance on me, Hannah. Take a chance and see what happens."

If she hadn't been so overwhelmed, she'd have shoved him away and declined, but she couldn't. She was just Hannah Graves from



Parkhurst. She had no parent to guide her, and she was struggling on her own out in the world. The road had been rocky and rough, and she'd made some dreadful blunders.

It wouldn't kill her to be a bride. It was the common path for nearly every female. And it wasn't as if it would be a heavy burden to have handsome, dashing Hunter Stone as her spouse. In fact, she was wondering if it might not be incredibly grand.

"Yes, I will marry you," she said.

He'd been holding his breath, and he exhaled so violently that he seemed to deflate. "I can't believe I persuaded you. I boasted that I could, but I was lying. You are so stubborn, and I'm stunned."

"You will have to keep your promises. No women. No more vices or dissolute living."

"I will turn myself into a saint—just for you."

"I don't need a saint. I simply need a normal, sensible husband."

"I've never been normal or sensible, so I'll have to work on that situation."

"When and where should we accomplish it?" she asked. "How about at Marston? It might be a good idea. If you hosted a large celebration, it would ingratiate you to the servants and the neighbors."

"I don't really know anyone here."

"How about London then? I attend a church there. We could have the vicar call the banns and be wed in a month."

"We shouldn't wait."

"Are you getting cold feet already?"

"No, but if I have four weeks to fret and stew, I might panic. *You* might back out too, and I'm not about to let you. How about if we elope to Scotland?"

"That sounds positively scandalous."

"I've never done anything the proper way," he said. "Haven't you figured that out?"

"What would people think?"

"I don't care two figs for idiots. We could ride like the wind, tie the knot in a hurry, then race home to England as man and wife. Our acquaintances could whine until they were blue in the face, but it would be over."

"Shouldn't I meet your father first? Shouldn't he have the

opportunity to render an opinion about me?"

"You are most especially not meeting my father in advance. I'm afraid you'd flee in horror."

"You haven't convinced me that there's much of a benefit to be joining your family."

"Once you're shackled to my side, then I'll introduce you to my relatives."

She laughed. "Well, you've met mine, and you're still willing to proceed, so I can't complain. When should we go?"

"What's tomorrow? Wednesday?"

"Yes, Wednesday."

"How about Saturday? I have to send some letters and arrange our travel. It will give me three days to organize my schedule."

She studied him, wondering if she was insane, but she might have been on a sled and careening down a steep hill. She couldn't slow or alter her course, so evidently, she was about to be Mrs. Hunter Stone, was about to be Viscountess Marston. How did she feel about it?

As she searched through a pile of conflicting emotions, she recognized the main one to be excitement.

"Let's ride for Scotland on Saturday," she said. "Let's marry without delay."

"Are you sure? If you try to renege, I'll kidnap you and drag you there."

"I'm not fickle, so you're stuck with me."

"I hadn't realized I was about to engage myself, so I don't have a betrothal ring to slip onto your finger. Can you forgive me for my hideous lack of planning?"

"I don't need a ring tonight, but you should probably find one before we reach Gretna Green."

"I will find the prettiest gold band in the kingdom. Just for you."

He sat on the sofa, and he kissed her long and hard, sealing the deal, boxing her in with what they'd decided. She was more eager than she'd ever been, and suddenly, Saturday seemed very far away.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hunter tiptoed toward Hannah's bedchamber. It was very late, and he'd had too much to drink, so it was highly likely he was making a bad decision, but he would proceed anyway.

It was Thursday night, and they'd enjoyed another perfect day at Marston, where they'd toured the estate and met more of the neighbors. With their finally agreeing to marry, they'd been able to tell people their wedding was imminent, so the frowns directed at Hannah had disappeared.

They'd been repeatedly congratulated, and he'd walked through it all in a daze. Was this really happening to him? It seemed as if he was dreaming.

He hadn't written to his father to explain that he was about to elope. Nor had he written to Isabella, and he would deal with her once he returned. He hadn't talked to Nate Carew either. His friend was a terrible gossip who would have rapidly spread the word that Hunter was about to be leg-shackled, and Hunter would rather have the news spread slowly and quietly.

So far, Jackson was the only person with whom they'd discussed the announcement to any significant degree. Hannah had informed him at breakfast, and he hadn't been particularly surprised.

He'd been courteously chatty about it, asking questions as to when they'd wed and where. He'd waited until she left the room, then he'd glared at Hunter and said, *I'll be glad about this for now, but if you ever hurt her, I'll kill you. I swear I will, and you shouldn't ever think I don't mean it.*

Hunter had firmly vowed that he would always cherish her. Jackson remained skeptical that he'd behave honorably, so Hunter would have to prove him wrong.

He never dithered and second-guessed, so shortly, he would ride to Scotland and become a married man. His bachelorhood was about to end, and he couldn't determine how he felt about that fact. He was numb on the inside, as if the whole notion of being a husband had frozen him.

The pathetic reality was that he'd never been so happy. He and Hannah were completely compatible, and they were destined to be together. If he'd tried to part from her, he had no doubt Fate would have intervened to stop him.

The emotions she generated were thrilling, and he wondered what sort of man he'd grow to be with her as his wife. She'd demanded he give up his disgusting habits and scurrilous acquaintances, and he'd promised he would.

Would he truly change his ways?

He couldn't imagine it. He'd had three decades to wallow in iniquity, and he reveled with rogues and trollops because he liked rogues and trollops. If he worked to be more respectable, if he settled down to be a gentleman farmer, could he maintain the ruse?

Well, he'd roll the dice and see where they landed. Even if he had a few good years with her before she realized he was a cur whom she couldn't abide, he would have those years to tuck into his box of experiences.

He took a deep breath, ordered himself to quit being an idiot, then he entered her suite.

The sitting room was dark, and in the bedroom, a candle burned on the nightstand. She hadn't crawled under the covers, and he could hear her humming in the dressing room beyond.

An unusual and potent rush of affection swept over him. He loved having her in his home, and the thought that she would always be present was soothing and delightful.

Why was he being so silly about her? He wasn't a fellow who ever waxed poetic, but he was suffering from the strongest perception that, if he didn't shackle himself to her, he'd regret it forever. It felt exactly right to wed her, and he'd never be sorry.

He crossed to the dressing room, and he leaned against the doorframe and quietly studied her. She was ready for bed, wearing a robe, her hair down. She'd finished brushing the pretty chestnut strands, and she put down the brush, then spun around.

On observing him, precisely where he shouldn't have been, she smiled with exasperation.

"You shouldn't be in here," she said, but she didn't shoo him out.

"I couldn't stay away, not with you being just down the hall. You're

too much of an enticement.”

“What if someone saw you?”

“The entire household is fast asleep, and even if there was a footman wandering about, we’re leaving for Scotland on Saturday. We’re allowed to break the rules.”

“You would say that.”

“I’ll never act as you’re expecting. How long will it be before it drives you batty?”

“I’m betting you’ll drive me batty from the very first minute. You’re vexing me right now. I ought to push you out and lock the door behind you.”

“But you won’t.”

Her smile widened. “No.”

She came over to him, and he pulled her close so her body was pressed to his all the way down. With her cloaked in just her robe, she might have been naked. Lust shot through him, a wave so powerful he was amazed his knees didn’t buckle.

For weeks, he’d been sniffing around her, but ignoring the desire she stirred, and with their racing toward an elopement, he didn’t have to continue ignoring it.

He dipped down and kissed her, and she joined in with an exhilarating amount of vigor. Since they’d become officially engaged, a new level of excitement had been added.

He picked her up and marched into the bedroom, and before she had the good sense to protest, he tumbled them onto the mattress. She was on her back, and he stretched out atop her. Every inch of his anatomy, down to the smallest pore, quivered with a joyous ecstasy, as if he’d finally arrived where he was meant to be.

“Tomorrow is Friday,” she said when their lips parted, “so we’re departing the day after. Have you gotten cold feet yet?”

“No. How about you?”

She curled her toes and grinned. “They’re not cold. They’re very, very warm.”

“Have you realized we can always snuggle like this in the future? No one will ever leap in to scold us.”

“I think I could be partial to snuggling.”

“So could I.” It was a stunning admission for him. He hadn’t

assumed he'd ever be intrigued by a female for an extended period, but she was spurring many changes. "I'm glad you're not a debutante or you'd have been surrounded by elderly aunties who'd have watched you like a hawk. I'd never have been permitted within ten feet of you."

"I have to confess that this is much better. I've actually had a chance to become acquainted with the *real* you. It wouldn't have happened in an ordinary courtship."

"Lucky us."

"We won't have a typical, boring marriage, will we?" she asked.

"Define typical and boring."

"In a *typical* marriage, we'd spend most of our time apart and pursuing separate interests. As the years rolled by, we'd begin carrying on like strangers, but I don't want that to be our conclusion. I want to build a genuine family with you. I never had that growing up, and I've always yearned to belong to someone."

"I never had it either," he said. "My father was a scoundrel and gambler who caroused in London, while my brothers and I rampaged on our own in the country. I'm surprised I survived my childhood."

"Can we make Marston our home? I would hate to tarry in London constantly. There are too many temptations for you there, and I like it here so much. You're so content too."

"Yes, we can live at Marston."

Was he sincere?

Promises were popping up so rapidly that he couldn't keep track. He'd already sworn he'd stick to his marriage vows, that he'd give up his wicked friends and vices. Now, he was claiming he'd move out of London for her. Would he?

Normally, he'd say she was deranged to suggest it, but he was so fond of her that he was having trouble refusing any of her requests. She wasn't even his wife yet, but he was wrapped around her little finger, so he was blithely agreeing to her every whim.

"We should share a bedchamber too," she went on. "Could we do that? Married couples usually don't, but I'd like us to be together every second."

"I'd like that too, so yes, we can share the master suite."

He was consenting to everything without pausing to consider the consequences. He was a solitary man who had his house in town, and

he'd never invited any of his paramours to it. He liked his privacy, and when he misbehaved with a female, he reveled at *her* lodging.

Would he like to be so intimately connected to Hannah? Would he like to wake up every morning by her side?

He suspected it would be perfect and very comforting.

The notion of matrimony was shaking his life to its very foundations, and he had to stop speaking—before he dug an even deeper hole. She was envisioning a future he couldn't quite picture, while *he* was simply trying to keep his head above water, so he didn't drown in the bizarre depths of the situation into which he'd tossed himself.

He started kissing her again, and to his great consternation, he was quickly overwhelmed.

Physical contact was what he understood, what he relished, and he figured she was a sensual creature who would provide him with extensive carnal entertainment. He'd have to lure her into the sexual portion of their relationship though, so she'd recognize how much fun they could have in their bedroom.

Gradually, the lapels of her robe fell open, so the center of her torso was exposed, and it goaded him to new heights of desire. Would this be their wedding night?

Maybe it should be. Otherwise, when would they complete the consummation? He couldn't imagine deflowering her in a noisy coaching inn in Scotland. Nor could he bear to wait until he was back at Marston. If he was going to have a wife, he wasn't about to postpone the very best piece of it.

He still wasn't convinced she'd elope with him, and he wasn't totally sure *he* would either. If they proceeded to fornication, they'd be bound and couldn't renege.

Was that the lust talking? Was it the alcohol? Was he merely making excuses for his bad intentions? It was entirely possible.

His curious fingers slipped under the fabric of her robe to massage her breast. It was the farthest he'd ever pushed her. She broke off their strident kiss and asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm touching you in your private places. It's what men and women do when they're alone like this."

"It's what they do when they're *married*." Her tone was scolding. "If they aren't married, it's a sin."

"I've never believed that. Besides, we'll be wed in a few days. Why delay?"

She gaped at him, then gulped with trepidation. "You'd like this to be our wedding night?"

"Why not? We'll just be celebrating a bit early." He grinned, positive he could wear her down. "I promise you'll like it."

She snorted with amusement. "You would think so."

"What's our other option? Will we accomplish it at a deary Scottish coaching inn?"

"I haven't really thought about it."

"Look at it this way: If we forge ahead, you won't be able to change your mind."

"I won't be able to? I'm not worried about me. I'm faithful and dependable, and I honor my commitments, but you're not particularly trustworthy. I'm doubting whether you'll ever stand next to me at an altar. I predict I'll wake up in Scotland the morning of my wedding, only to find that you fled in terror when my back was turned."

He rolled his eyes. "You'll never be that lucky. You're stuck with me, so let's behave precisely as we shouldn't, and you'll have me tightly ensnared."

"I don't want you ensnared. I want you to be eager and glad, all on your own."

"I'm eager, and I'm glad, and if I'm ensnared, I must admit it's the best feeling in the world."

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Hannah stared at Hunter. She couldn't resist him and couldn't tell him *no*. He had such a strong personality, and it was clear he would constantly coerce her into giving him what he sought.

She laughed and said, "I'm realizing how my life will unfold with you. You told me you always get your way, and you probably will. Will there ever be an occasion where I thwart you?"

"No, never."

"How about if you're being wildly irresponsible or negligent? How about then?"

"If I'm being wild or negligent, I will *try* to listen to you. I won't offer any guarantees though. I've had thirty years of engaging in any



mischief that tickles my fancy. I'm not certain I'll ever rein in my worst impulses."

"Your comment doesn't reassure me in the least. Am I mad to have agreed to this? I've been asking myself that question repeatedly."

"Yes, you're mad," he said, "but then, I have that effect on people. I drive them insane."

"I can't imagine this ending well."

"Neither can I, but think of the fun we'll have."

"I've been in a rut, haven't I?" she said. "It won't kill me to climb out of this hole I've dug for myself. I shouldn't be such a stick in the mud."

"You will enjoy the ride. I swear."

He dipped in again, his lips capturing hers in a tempestuous embrace. Instantly, she was too overwhelmed to assess what was occurring. She was content to be swept along on the tide of his rising desire. As with their previous interactions, it was easier to comply than to argue. She never won their debates anyway, so why bother?

He was anxious for it to be their wedding night, but it was a facet of matrimony she hadn't considered. She was floating on a raft of exhilaration that seemed like a dream or, perhaps, like a fantastical plot in a romantic novel. She hadn't gazed down the road to marital conduct. There hadn't been time.

Would she like it to be her wedding night? Might it be better to finish it?

She suspected he was correct, that it would be awkward to accomplish it in Scotland. The problem for her though was that she didn't know what was supposed to transpire. She'd heard varying stories: that it was painful, that it was embarrassing, that it was wonderful.

She'd never had a female she could ask for particulars. Apparently, it involved excessive nudity, and the main aspect that made it marvelous or horrid was the man who was the woman's partner. If he was experienced and attentive, it was splendid. But if he was inexperienced, if he was cruel or self-centered, then it was a huge chore.

She had no doubt Hunter Stone would be fabulous at it, that he would make it perfect, so she decided by *not* deciding. She simply leapt into the pot he was stirring, and she had to admit, he was adept at

keeping her intrigued.

He was caressing her, his palms skimming her intimate places, lingering, so she quivered with excitement. He was opening her robe, untying the belt, tugging it off her shoulders. Without much effort, she was naked, and though she should have been aghast, he calmed her by carrying on as if nudity was a natural condition.

He was smiling and murmuring endearments so she wound up feeling as if she was avidly participating, but in reality, she was doing very little, mostly because she had no idea what to do. She followed his lead. When he touched her, she touched him. When he bit her skin, she bit his too, and she appeared to have a knack for salacious behavior.

The encounter grew more risqué. He nibbled a trail down her neck, to her bosom, to her breasts. He played with them, pinching and squeezing the nipples, and it created such a shocking burst of agitation that she had to stop him so she could catch her breath.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Don’t tell me I’ve frightened you.”

“It’s not that. It’s simply happening so fast.”

“Should I slow down? Would you like that?”

“No, I’m just...just...” She didn’t know what she *was*. She was merely eager to please him, but she wasn’t sure how.

“Has anyone told you what occurs?” he asked.

“Not really. I guess it’s very physical, and it can be horrid or wonderful—depending on the man.”

He grinned. “I promise, with me, it will always be wonderful.”

“Vain beast. Can you explain where we’re headed?”

“No. I don’t have the vocabulary for that sort of discussion. It’s easier if I show you.” His grin widened. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“No.”

“When we’re together like this, you can always have faith in me.”

He hovered there, wearing her down with his incessant charisma. If she’d had two pennies of sense, she’d have pushed him away and ordered him to depart, but her sense had vanished, and she didn’t suppose she’d ever find it again.

“I better like it,” she said. “If I don’t, I’ll never quit complaining.”

“You’ll *like* it so much you’ll probably never climb out of my bed. You’ll be completely enslaved by lust and unable to break free of my wicked ways.”

She chuckled, thinking this was the best part of winning him for her own. He was funny and kind and so accursedly pompous. She would never have a dull moment with him.

He dipped to her bosom again, and instead of playing with her nipples, he sucked one of them into his mouth. It set off more bodily reactions, and his ministrations distracted her so thoroughly that she didn't notice as his naughty hand drifted down her tummy.

It continued on, across her abdomen, until finally, he arrived at her womanly sheath. He astounded her by sliding a finger into it, then a second one, and he stroked them in and out, in and out, as he sucked on her nipple. The act was so shocking, and it produced such a riveting anatomical response, that she didn't bother protesting.

Her hips flexed against his palm, as if she was aware, on an instinctual level, precisely what was required. He flicked his thumb on the sensitive spot at the vee of her thighs—once, twice—and it ignited an inferno of ecstasy where she felt as if she was soaring up to the heavens. The bliss was so incredible that she cried out with delight, and she worried she might shatter into a thousand pieces. Would the frenzy ever end?

Eventually, she reached a type of apex, then she tumbled down and down, landing safely in his arms. He was laughing, preening, proud of himself and what he'd wrought.

"What was that?" she asked.

"That was sexual pleasure—and an exquisite example of it too. I shall have no problem corrupting you."

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. "Am I still a...a...virgin?"

"Yes, you still are."

"Am I with child?"

"Not yet. There's more to it. May I show you the rest? Will you let me?"

They weren't married, and she knew right from wrong. They shouldn't keep walking down the road they were on, but they'd already tiptoed out onto a hazardous ledge, and he was gazing at her with such affection. How could she deny him?

"Yes, I would like you to show me the rest," she said, but he perceived her trepidation.

"You needn't be afraid. I'll make it quick, so it will be over fast."

“Don’t you dare make it quick. I want to remember every detail, and if we hurry, I won’t recollect later on.”

“I will go as slowly as I can manage, but you, dear Hannah, push me beyond my limit. I doubt I will ever be able to control myself around you.”

They shared a potent look, where a thousand unspoken comments swirled, and she told herself it would be fine in the end. She had to stop fretting over every little issue and give him a chance to prove he could be the man of her dreams.

He leapt into the fray, kissing her, touching her all over. She was so relaxed that her limbs wouldn’t obey any commands. She simply laid back and allowed him to shower her with his fabulous attention.

His movements became more determined, more forceful, and for some reason, he was unbuttoning his trousers. She was unclear as to why he would, and there was no opportunity to seek clarification. The event was escalating so rapidly.

He widened her thighs, his torso dropping between them, as he tugged his trousers down to his haunches. All the while, he was caressing her, driving her mad with delicious yearning.

He was fussing with her sheath again, his fingers gliding in and out, exciting her, arousing her. Then something else was there, something thicker and bigger. She’d planned to ask him what it was, but before she could, he sucked on her nipple and flicked his thumb at the vee of her thighs.

It sent her into another outrageous spiral, and as she flew to the heavens a second time, his hips executed a particularly firm thrust, and he seemed to burst inside her. It didn’t hurt exactly, but it was the most peculiar thing she’d ever experienced.

She was stunned, but he was a tad stunned as well, and he ceased his rhythmic flexing.

“What just happened?” she asked once she could talk again.

“We’ve joined our bodies together.”

“Is this the marital act?”

“Yes. It’s what husbands and wives do in the bedchamber.”

She frowned. “It feels as if you are inside me. How is that possible?”

“Men and women are built differently in our private parts. I have a sort of rod between my legs.”

“What’s it called?”

“A cock? A phallus?”

“Ah...” she murmured. She’d heard the terms, but had never mustered the courage to inquire what they meant.

“My cock slides into you,” he said, “as if the Good Lord designed us this way.”

“Is it how a babe is planted?”

“Yes, this is how. Every time, you could wind up increasing.”

She’d never pictured herself being a mother, but suddenly, she was swamped by the most powerful perception that she couldn’t wait. She prayed she would give him a dozen children and that they’d all be boys with his blond hair and confident swagger.

Tears flooded into her eyes, which was odd because she wasn’t sad, and he looked stricken.

“Was I too rough?” he asked. “Are you unhappy? What is it?”

“I’m even more overwhelmed.”

“So am I,” he surprised her by saying, “but this is a monumental occasion for both of us, and you can’t be sad. Swear to me that you’re not.”

“I’m not; I swear.”

“You can’t ever regret this.”

“How could I have regrets?”

Even if it crashed down in the end, even if he never became the man she was hoping, how could she ever lament what had occurred so far?

He smiled and started in yet again, kissing her, nibbling, whispering divine compliments that made her feel special and even a bit beloved. His hips were working, and she eagerly joined in.

In the beginning, he was very deliberate, very precise, but as they continued, as his passion intensified, he grew wilder and more out of control. Finally, he pushed in very dramatically, and he held himself just there. He groaned and collapsed onto her.

They were very still, his weight pressing her down into the mattress, and she had a minute to assess every detail. She decided it was the most spectacular event ever. No wonder he couldn’t describe it! Who could have?

Ultimately, he drew away and rolled onto his side, so she rolled too. They were nose to nose, giggling like halfwits, too astonished to

comment.

“What did you think?” he asked after awhile. “And don’t lie. Tell me your true opinion.”

“It was different from what I was expecting.”

“That’s why I didn’t try to explain it. I couldn’t have.”

“It was quite...marvelous.”

She’d hesitated before she voiced the word *marvelous*, and he swatted her on the bottom.

“You minx. You had me on pins and needles over what you’d choose.”

“You’re very good at this.”

“I plan that *you* will get good at it too. I’m a very thorough teacher.”

“Can we do it every day?”

He sputtered out a laugh. “Yes, my little vixen. We can do it whenever and wherever you like. I shall always be at your beck and call.”

He shifted onto his back, so he was staring up at the ceiling. He pulled her over, so she was draped across his chest. In the prior stories about carnal conduct, no one had ever mentioned this perfect interlude afterward. A thrilling intimacy had blossomed, and if she wasn’t careful, she would fall madly in love with him.

She couldn’t let that happen. Where he was concerned, she would guard her heart, so he could never break it.

They were silent, lost in thought, then he said, “I’ve trapped you now, so you can’t escape. You’ll have to marry me.”

She popped up and grinned at him. “I’ve trapped *you* too. You’ll be mine forever.”

“Aren’t I lucky.”

She sighed with gladness, and swiftly, she was drifting off. The entire episode had been exhausting, and she felt as if she’d been scrubbed raw. She yawned and could barely keep her eyes open.

She was confused over how they were to proceed for the remainder of the night. Was it all right for her to doze off? Was it allowed? What if he dozed off too? What if her maid came in at dawn to light the fire and caught him in her bed? What then? When they were leaving for Scotland on Saturday, how could it matter?

She never answered those questions, but plunged into a deep

slumber, and when she awakened, it was full morning or perhaps even afternoon. The sun shining in the windows was that bright.

Without even glancing over, she was certain he'd left. She hadn't heard him depart, and she could only hope none of the servants had seen him.

She stretched her legs, taking stock of her condition, and she appeared to be fine. She was tender in her feminine areas, but other than that, she'd survived her deflowering. Was that what it had been?

In her mind, she reached out to Hunter. Where was he that very moment? Was he thinking of her? How would they interact when she bumped into him again?

Her pulse raced with a joy that amazed her. She was happy and excited and about to travel to Scotland to become his wife. She couldn't wait.

"Mrs. Hunter Stone," she said to the quiet room. "Imagine that."  
She tossed off the blankets and rose to face the day.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hunter slipped in a rear door, intending to head to his bedchamber to wash and change his clothes. He'd been riding for hours, trying to clear his mind and figure out where he was going.

He'd snuck out of Hannah's bedchamber just as dawn was breaking, and he'd been too rattled to return to his own room. He wouldn't have been able to sleep.

Because he was such a debauched rogue, he'd never counted how many lovers he'd had. It was the sorry state of his world that it was filled with trollops, and they were mostly fallen angels who couldn't obey the fussy rules that were supposed to guide them. They craved a different kind of existence than what was generally allowed to females, and they reached out and seized it.

He liked those loose women very much, and he'd dallied with every sort of doxy. To him, sexual congress was a physical act that was pleasurable and exciting, but he never ascribed higher motives to it, so he'd been completely unprepared for how much he'd enjoy fornicating with Hannah.

Oh, he'd suspected it would be entertaining, but he hadn't anticipated the raucous emotion that would be generated.

She'd dozed off in his arms, and he'd held her for hours as he'd struggled to deduce what had happened to him. Was he in love with her? Could it be? Could he—the great user and abuser of women—have finally been ensnared?

How else could he describe the sentiments pelting him? The episode had stirred such passionate yearning that he was wondering how he could live without her.

If he'd been forced to furnish an opinion, he'd have categorically insisted that *love* was only present in romantic novels and sonnets. He didn't believe it was a condition a man could suffer, and he most especially believed Cupid's arrow could never strike him, yet he felt as if he was dying with affection for her.

He was so befuddled that he'd left the property, had galloped for



miles down the country lanes, but the lengthy trek hadn't improved his situation. He was more confused than ever about what was transpiring.

He walked down the hall, curious if Hannah was up. It had to be noon or even later. How would they interact once they bumped into each other? He thought he might toss her over his shoulder and carry her up the stairs to his bedchamber.

As he neared the foyer, a footman saw him and said, "Lord Marston, you have company."

Before he could inquire as to who it was, Nate stuck his nose out of the library. He grinned and waved. "There you are. None of the servants could locate you. I was beginning to worry you'd traveled back to town, and we'd crossed paths without realizing it."

Hunter couldn't tamp down a wince. Nate was the very last person he wanted to have visit. He was awash with conflicted feelings about his hasty decision to march to the altar, and he couldn't bear to explain the issue to his friend.

His relationship with Nate had been formed in the army. They'd both been wounded in that same terrible attack, and they'd been sent home to England together, which had meant they'd spent many months in cramped quarters. It had cemented a bond between them that wouldn't have developed otherwise.

They didn't have much in common—except for that dreadful experience. Nate didn't possess any of Hunter's better traits. He was always broke too, so Hunter constantly gave him money. Hunter had plenty of his own, so he didn't necessarily mind helping out, but Nate had started to presume on Hunter's generosity.

Their main interest, the one that connected them, was their fascination with vice and slatterns. If Hunter abandoned his reckless ways, as he'd promised Hannah he would, what reason would he have to continue socializing with Nate?

"How did you find me?" Hunter asked.

"I ran into your father. He told me where you were."

Hunter hadn't ordered his father to keep his whereabouts a secret, so he couldn't exactly complain that Neville had tattled.

"At first," Nate said, "I was certain he was jesting. I couldn't picture you loafing here. You don't care about this stupid place. How are you surviving all the fresh air and rural living? Has it driven you mad yet?"

It was an awful comment, and the footman was still hovering, waiting to learn if Hunter sought any assistance. He'd heard Nate's derogatory remark, and he couldn't conceal his contempt.

Hunter sighed with aggravation. He was working to ingratiate himself to the staff, but with one snide insult from Nate, his efforts had probably been ruined. Gossip would spread that he was a pompous boor who had rude friends.

"I'm having a very enjoyable holiday," he said to Nate. "I deem Marston to be the finest estate in the kingdom, and I'm lucky it's mine." Then to the footman, "I'll be having a brandy with Mr. Carew, but if anyone needs me, feel free to interrupt."

He entered the room, vaguely irked that Nate had been deposited there instead of the front parlor. He was a snoop though, so perhaps he'd just been exploring and Hunter had stumbled on him when he wasn't where he was supposed to be.

Nate had found the liquor tray and was holding a full glass of brandy. Hunter went to the sideboard and poured his own glass, then sat behind the desk. As Nate pulled up a chair across from him, it seemed as if they were about to conduct a hostile employment interview.

"Please tell me you're not planning to stay the night," Hunter said. "I'm hoping you're merely passing through, and you're actually journeying on to a house party down the road."

"Of course I'm staying. Why wouldn't I be welcome?"

"I'm leaving myself in the morning."

"Are you returning to London? It's been positively boring without you there."

"No, I'm not heading to London." Hunter sipped his liquor, glaring. "Are you about to beg me for a loan? Is that it? Otherwise, I can't imagine why you'd arrive unannounced."

Nate scowled. "Since when must I be announced? I assumed you'd be glad to see me. Is this property so grand that an invitation is required? Or have I upset you? If so, I remain unaware of any transgression."

"No, no, sorry." Hunter waved away the question. "Don't pay any attention to me. I'm distracted by some problems, and I'm having trouble concentrating. It's making me surly."

"For your information, I don't need an infusion of funds. I'm

delighted to report that I'm about to receive some money."

"How?"

"A distressed young lady, who is very angry with her mother, has agreed to marry me. After I'm her husband, her dowry will be mine."

Hunter scoffed with derision. "No sensible girl would wed you."

"That shows how much you know about amour. Her mother should have been away from home this week, so we were going to elope, but the accursed woman didn't depart as we were expecting. We've rescheduled my adventure for next Saturday or maybe the one after that. We'll keep trying until she and I can manage to sneak away."

"I can't ever figure out when you're serious and when you aren't."

"It's true! I'm not joking."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Hunter said. "You have no charm, so why would she have listened to you?"

"Who says I'm not charming? You're not the only rogue in the kingdom. I wore her down with my devoted wooing."

Hunter spat out a laugh. "Who is she? Am I acquainted with her?"

Nate huffed with feigned offense. "I'm a gentleman, and I would never besmirch her character. I will introduce her once she's my bride. I can't have rumors leaking out before then."

Hunter rolled his eyes. "I will be perched on pins and needles, eager to hear that you're married."

"Enough about me. I've been dying to ask about *you*. What's wrong? We were in the middle of your mistress interviews, but we didn't finish them, so you haven't picked who you like. There are several tarts anxious to discover if they were the winning candidate."

"They'll survive until I get back."

Nate launched into a diatribe about the benefits and detriments of the doxies Hunter had met recently, but as he babbled on, Hunter was so detached from the event that he couldn't envision himself as the cad who'd participated.

His annual *search* for a paramour was the stuff of legends, the sort of antic that had men toasting him when he walked into a room, but with his being about to ride off to Scotland with Hannah, it simply sounded sordid and disgusting. What was the matter with him? Why couldn't he behave better?

His sudden disinterest was shocking. Had he already exited the

demimonde? Had he already grown halfway respectable? Could a man alter himself that quickly?

A shiver worked down his spine. He couldn't imagine living quietly in the country with his wife, yet that was the future he was creating for himself. It was all happening too fast.

The mistress interviews were just one dissolute act, in a lengthy list of them, that were being called into question. He wouldn't mention the dilemma to Nate though because he'd have to talk about Hannah and the fact that he was so smitten he couldn't think straight.

He had to escort his friend out to his horse and send him on his way. It wasn't that late. If he left soon, he could travel to London with no difficulty.

"I really liked that brunette in the last group," Nate said. "Do you remember her? She had the most gorgeous breasts."

"She wasn't that intelligent. I couldn't carry on a conversation with her."

"When have you ever chosen a paramour by how adept she is at pithy conversation? I'm certain you choose them for another type of activity entirely."

Hunter smirked. "You know me well."

"Will you be able to select from the girls I've provided so far? Or should I start from scratch?"

"At the moment, I can't focus on it. The whole notion is incredibly fatiguing."

"What is fatiguing about it? Are you ill? Is that why you slunk away to the country without apprising anyone of your plans?"

"I'm not ill. I'm simply pondering a dicey situation."

He should have blurted out that Hannah was in residence, that they were departing in the morning for Gretna Green. But Nate could be sarcastic and mocking, and if he made disparaging remarks about Hannah or matrimony, they'd fight, and Hunter didn't want to quarrel.

He just wanted Nate to leave.

"When are you coming back to town?" Nate asked.

"I'm not sure."

"You're being extremely furtive, so what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, except that I can't have a guest right now."

Nate blew out a heavy breath. "Well, excuse me for being worried

and tracking you down. You still haven't told me how I should proceed. You desperately need a new mistress. Shall I round up another group of trollops for you to interview? You didn't like the previous ones, but pretty doxies are a penny a dozen. I can drum up more of them for you."

"I'll decide about them after I return to London."

"I hate to point it out, but you'll have a horrendous time getting rid of Isabella."

"I realize that."

"She hasn't packed a single trunk of her belongings. It doesn't seem to me that she's intending to move out of your house, but I can't see you allowing her to stay. Not when you're about to pick someone else. During the carriage ride here, I tried to talk some sense into her, but she's so stubborn. She wouldn't listen."

Hunter had been woolgathering as Nate bloviated, so he hadn't exactly caught the import of his comment. He lurched up in his chair and rather frantically asked, "What was that? Something about riding here with Isabella?"

"Yes, and we're expecting to tarry for a few days. I had no idea you'd kick us out."

Hunter rippled with alarm. "Isabella is with you? She's in the manor?"

"Ah...yes?"

"Where is she this very instant?"

"I assume she's upstairs in a bedchamber and freshening up so she can stroll down and surprise you."

Hunter leapt up so violently that his chair tipped over.

"What is it?" Nate asked. "What did I say?"

Before Hunter could clarify the debacle, the library door slammed open with a loud bang, and Hannah was standing there. She looked very, very angry. If her eyes could have shot daggers, he'd have been dead on the floor.

Hunter had never been more embarrassed. From how she was glaring, she must have eavesdropped. His mind raced to recall what he and Nate had been discussing. How much had she heard? How awful had they sounded?

"I just stopped by," she said, "to inform you that your mistress, Isabella Darling, is on the premises—while I am here too."

"I...ah...ah...can explain..." he mumbled like an idiot.

"I don't believe any explanation is necessary, and it appears you and Mr. Carew are very busy—with your *search* for a new mistress. Don't let me keep you."

Then she spun and stomped off.

"Was that Hannah Graves?" Nate asked.

"Yes, that was Miss Graves, so I demand you find Isabella—at once. The two of you should be in your carriage and on your way to town in the next five minutes. If Isabella refuses to accompany you, haul her out and toss her into your vehicle. Don't dawdle, and don't make me tell you twice."

Hunter hurried out without glancing back. He was determined to locate Hannah and apologize, but his heart was in his boots. He couldn't imagine how he'd earn any forgiveness, and he doubted he could spew the words to fix what had happened.

What man could?

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Hannah walked down the hall to the stairs. Even though it was afternoon already, she was famished and praying she could be served some breakfast. She was feeling nervous and even a tad shy. Every second, she was braced to bump into Hunter, and she couldn't deduce how she ought to greet him.

What would be appropriate?

She'd washed and dressed, and a housemaid had assisted her with her hair and clothes. She'd asked where Hunter was, and the girl had said he'd risen early and had gone riding, but she didn't know if he'd returned.

Hannah couldn't figure out what his absence indicated. Why would he have left? Why wasn't he pacing in a parlor and anxiously waiting for her to join him?

She pondered the questions, then shoved them away. She couldn't expect him to twiddle his thumbs as she slept the day away. The following morning, they would head to Scotland, and she'd become his wife. She hoped she hadn't developed a reputation with him as a laggard.

She approached the landing, and a door opened as someone exited a

bedchamber. It wasn't Hunter's room though, so she couldn't guess who it might be, but in case a guest had arrived, she halted and smiled.

To her great shock, a woman emerged. She was flamboyantly attired in a bright red gown, the bodice cut very low. Her hair was intricately styled, with braids and curls, as if she'd wasted several hours primping and preening so she'd look stunning.

As she spun toward Hannah, Time stood still. The sight confronting her was so peculiar and so out of place that she couldn't process what she was witnessing.

"What are you doing here?" they said in unison.

Isabella Darling sauntered over to Hannah, and Hannah was so dazed she couldn't move. The brazen trollop kept coming until they were toe to toe, and she towered over Hannah in a threatening manner.

"I asked you first," Miss Darling said. "Why are you in Hunter's home? Answer me immediately!"

Hannah drew herself up to her full height, which wasn't nearly enough to intimidate. "I shouldn't have to converse with you. Nor do I owe you an explanation for my current circumstance."

"You listen to me, you pathetic tart!"

Miss Darling had the audacity to grab Hannah's arm. Hannah yanked away and said, "If you're curious about my presence, you should discuss it with Lord Marston."

She skirted by Miss Darling and marched down the stairs. Miss Darling peered over the railing, and she fumed, "Hold it right there, Miss Graves! I'm not finished speaking to you, and you don't have my permission to flounce away!"

Hannah glared up at her. "It's outrageous that you would assume you have the authority to boss me. I am not your servant and *you* are a doxy."

"Where are you going?" the harpy demanded.

"I'm going to find Lord Marston to learn how fast you can be thrown out."

"If anyone is leaving, Miss Graves, I'm sorry to report that it will be you."

Hannah didn't bother to respond. She simply continued on.

She'd never been so angry. During the idyllic interval she'd spent at Marston, she'd forgotten about Hunter's life in town. She'd pretended

his debauchery hadn't occurred. She wasn't even wed to him yet, and his mistress was strolling about, bold as brass.

How was Hannah to deal with such an unseemly situation? If she became his bride, would this be a regular sort of encounter?

She'd once asked him if he'd ever brought any other women to Marston, and he'd claimed Hannah was the only one he'd ever welcomed. She'd believed him, but Miss Darling appeared confident and settled, as if she'd visited on a hundred prior occasions.

Suddenly, Hannah was questioning every decision she'd made in the past few days. Her hasty agreement to marry Hunter underscored why a female didn't choose a husband for herself, why her father chose for her. What did she really know about Hunter? Why would she wed him? Might it be dangerous and foolish?

He was a cad and a gambler. She'd met precisely one of his friends—the vulgar and rude Mr. Carew—and she hadn't met any others. She'd suggested she be introduced to his father, but he'd refused to allow it.

What kind of son didn't want his fiancée to meet his father? Was Hunter even planning to marry her? Were they actually traveling to Scotland?

He'd proposed, and she'd accepted, then he'd convinced her to ruin herself. He'd said they would be husband and wife very soon, so there was no reason to delay. Like the most naïve girl, she'd let him persuade her.

Should she have? What if he'd seduced her simply because he could? What if it had been a depraved game where she'd been the innocent and unsuspecting victim?

She reached the foyer, and a footman was passing by. When she inquired about Hunter, she was informed that he was back. She was directed to his library, with the quiet mention that he was chatting with a guest.

Who had come with Miss Darling? Was it one of her illicit friends? Was the manor to be overrun by harlots?

Hannah was so incensed she was surprised she didn't faint.

The door was ajar as she approached the room, and she could hear male voices inside. One of them was Hunter, and she couldn't identify the other, but she supposed it was Nate Carew. At Mr. Carew's words, Hannah's heart dropped to her slippers.



*You still haven't told me how I should proceed. You desperately need a new mistress. Shall I round up another group of trollops for you to interview? You didn't like the previous ones, but pretty doxies are a penny a dozen. I can drum up more of them for you.*

Hunter's reply was even more shocking. *I'll decide about them after I return to London.*

After Miss Darling had accosted Hannah at her shop, she'd asked Hunter if he was interviewing for another mistress, and he'd vehemently denied the accusation. But he'd lied to her! He'd looked her in the face and had lied!

He'd conveyed her to Marston, had charmed and wooed her, had plied her with expensive gifts, had made her start to fall in love with him. And all the while, he was arranging to resume his corrupt activities in the city.

The perception that he'd had wicked intentions toward her was growing stronger by the minute. Was he truly expecting to take her to Scotland in the morning? Why was she abruptly thinking she'd get up at dawn, only to discover that he'd snuck away like a thief in the night?

Unfortunately, she now understood why people were driven to commit a homicide. If she'd had a pistol, she'd have stomped in and shot him right between the eyes. Instead, she slapped a palm on the wood of the door and pushed so forcefully that it whipped around and slammed into the wall.

The loud bang caused Hunter and Mr. Carew to jump with alarm.

She didn't give him a chance to speak. She merely said, "I just stopped by to inform you that your mistress, Isabella Darling, is on the premises—while I am here too."

"I...ah...ah...can explain..."

"I don't believe any explanation is necessary, and it appears you and Mr. Carew are very busy—with your *search* for a new mistress. Don't let me keep you."

She whirled away and ran for the stairs. As she stormed up them, Miss Darling was descending. She was smug and superior, as if she held all the cards. Well, Miss Darling could have Hunter Stone, and she was welcome to him!

"You're a tad upset, Miss Graves," the vicious shrew said. "What's wrong?"

Hannah shoved by her, and Miss Darling dared to grab her arm again. From higher up the stairs, Jackson interrupted the hideous scene.

“Release her, you old whore!”

It was a horrendous remark, but Hannah was too livid to scold him. She jerked away as Miss Darling snidely sneered up at Jackson and said, “Were you talking to me, young man?”

“Yes, I was. Touch my sister again, and I’ll break your hand.”

Hannah flitted up to him, and they walked off together. She was shaking so violently that she was amazed she could remain on her feet.

“I was just coming to warn you about her,” he told her as they entered her suite. “Mr. Carew has arrived too.”

“I know. He’s down in the library with Lord Marston.”

“You’re so distressed. Were they discussing you? Lord Marston is so fond of you. He can’t have said anything awful.”

“It wasn’t *me* specifically, but I heard a terrible comment I shouldn’t have heard, so I can’t continue to tarry at Marston.”

“But...you’re leaving for Scotland tomorrow.”

“No, I’m not. I’m not sure Lord Marston ever planned to take me.”

Jackson was very astute. He studied her pained expression and recognized that there had been a dreadful incident. He didn’t question her about it. He was her fiercest champion and would always be her staunchest defender.

“How shall we proceed?” he asked. “It’s not appropriate for that slattern to be in the house with you. Shall I mention it to Lord Marston? Shall I demand he send her away?”

“I don’t care about her. *We* are departing instead. Would you do me a favor?”

“I’ll do you a thousand favors.”

“Find a satchel for me, so I can pack some clothes. Pack your few things too. Then request that a carriage be harnessed.”

“We’re going now?”

“Yes, now.”

“What’s our destination?”

“We’ll figure it out after we’re away.”

It was clear he was anxious to inquire about what had happened, but there would be plenty of time to confess it later. For the moment, she had to escape or she might explode.

“All right,” he said, “I’ll bring you a satchel in a few minutes.”

“Don’t dawdle. I’m in a bit of a rush.”

“I’ll be back before you can blink.”

He dashed off, and she went into her dressing room.

In such a disordered state, she shouldn’t make important decisions, but she wouldn’t speak to Hunter Stone about what had occurred. He’d spew lies and sweet-talk her until she couldn’t tell up from down.

She just had to flee, and she’d keep moving until she was far enough away that she could breathe again.

She scrutinized the pretty garments he’d bought for her. It had been stupid to accept them, and she thought they were emblematic of how adept he was at coercing her. She didn’t want to take any of them, but she didn’t have any others.

After a hasty debate, she picked three gowns, the plainest, simplest ones of the lot, then she added a cloak, some undergarments, and an extra pair of slippers. She scooped them up and hurried out to the bedroom. She folded the items into a neat pile, so when Jackson returned with a satchel, she could stuff it full.

She wouldn’t have to delay a single second.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Hunter marched up the stairs toward Hannah's bedroom. Since he'd never planned to marry, he'd never previously had a fiancée. He'd settled things with her so quickly that there'd been no time to make any changes in London.

He'd planned to handle all of it after he returned from Scotland. Many aspects of his corrupt existence had to be ended or hidden from her, beginning with his bevy of doxies.

After she'd run out of the library, he'd tracked down the butler and had instructed him to rid Hunter of Nate and Isabella. With Hunter being new to the title, the servants hadn't understood the ramifications of admitting the dissolute pair.

He'd been blunt in explaining the dilemma to the older man, and the poor fellow had been very stoic about the entire affair. Hunter trusted him to get them moving, but as he reached the landing, Isabella was sauntering down the hall.

He tried to never be an ass, to never lose his temper, and she'd been his paramour for a year, so he warned himself to calm down.

No doubt Nate had allowed her to travel to Marston, but she shouldn't have accompanied him. Hunter had strict rules about the areas of his world she was permitted to inhabit, and she recognized what they were. Her position as mistress didn't confer the right to show up at Marston, and she knew it didn't.

"Hunter! There you are!" she said. "I've been looking everywhere."

"Isabella! Why are you here?"

His sharp tone unnerved her. "Nate and I hadn't heard from you in days, and we were worried."

"I am an adult male with a very full and private life that doesn't always include you. You're blatantly aware of that fact."

She was never one to cower or retreat. "Yes, but we were *worried*. Don't scold me for being concerned about you."

"You're leaving. Now," he said.

"What? No! We just arrived, and the maids haven't even unpacked

my bags.”

“Let’s review the situation, shall we? Were you invited to visit me?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Then I regret to inform you that you are not welcome, so you and Nate are departing for London immediately.”

“You’re being ridiculous. Half the afternoon has passed. You can’t expect us to take to the highways with evening approaching.”

“It’s little more than two hours to town. I’m sure you’ll survive.”

He clasped her arm and started down the stairs. She dragged her feet and protested, but she couldn’t prevent their descent.

“Hunter!” she complained, and as they crossed the foyer, she yanked out of his grasp. “What is wrong with you?”

He leaned in and tightly murmured, “You are *not* welcome, Isabella. How much more frank must I be with you?”

On observing his livid expression, she realized how far she’d stepped out of bounds, and she instantly retrenched.

“I most humbly apologize,” she said. “I sincerely assumed you would enjoy being surprised.”

“I am not surprised. I am incensed.”

He seized her arm again and stormed to the door. A footman was standing there, and he whipped it open as if they’d rehearsed the timing. Hunter kept on outside, practically carrying her as she sputtered with affront.

Nate’s carriage hadn’t appeared yet, but he was loafing, cooling his heels. At being reminded of his idiocy, Hunter’s temper flared anew. He couldn’t figure out why he and Nate were still friends, and he suspected—if his engagement wound up being scuttled—he’d blame Nate forever.

“Isabella!” Nate said. “I was wondering where you were. Hunter wasn’t glad to see us. We’ve been kicked out, but I guess Hunter has apprised you.”

“Sod off, Nate,” Isabella crudely spat.

“Watch your mouth,” Hunter snapped. “I won’t have my servants offended by your foul language.”

“Honestly, Hunter,” she replied, “what’s come over you? From how you’re acting, the world could have just ended.”

For him, maybe it had. “You’ll wait for Nate’s carriage, then you’ll climb in and depart. I won’t argue about it.”

“But I don’t have my bags! Am I to leave without them?”

“I’ll inquire of the butler. If they’re not ready, I’ll send them on.”

She stamped her foot like a spoiled toddler. “You weren’t even curious as to why I was searching for you.”

“It doesn’t matter why you were searching.”

“Why is Hannah Graves here?” she demanded. “I think I have the right to know. Am I being tossed out because of her? Is that where I am with you? If you tell me that, I’ll never believe it.”

Nate winced and leapt away, as if an explosion was imminent. As to Hunter, he furiously stated, “It’s none of your business why I’m tossing you out. I’ve ordered you to go, and you shall!”

Isabella was obviously rattled by his outburst. “I was just *asking*. You don’t have to bite my head off.”

“Be silent!” He actually shouted the command, but then, he was feeling a tad unhinged. “You have become entirely too proud of your spot with me, and I suggest you reflect on that problem.”

“You haven’t picked another mistress, and you promised I could stay.”

“If that’s what you suppose, then you are either confused or you’re lying. We’re through, and I will have servants begin packing your belongings, so I can move you out of my house.”

He whirled away, and she called, “Hunter! You can’t mean it.”

He glared over his shoulder, flashing such a wave of disdain that he was amazed it didn’t knock her over. He spoke to Nate, not to her. “Get her out of my driveway and don’t travel here ever again.”

He dashed up the stairs, where the butler and a footman were gaping at the unfolding drama as if it were a thrilling theatrical play.

“Send someone to the stables,” he said. “Have them hurry with Mr. Carew’s carriage. I want those two ingrates gone as quickly as you can manage it. While they dawdle, don’t let them wheedle their way back into the manor. And take a good look at their faces. Should they show up in the future, they shouldn’t be allowed inside. Have I made myself clear?”

He was never short with other people. Most especially, he was never short with his servants, but he was just so angry! They nodded vigorously, as he marched by them.

He had to talk to Hannah, and he’d have to be more eloquent and

more persuasive than he'd ever been in the past. What excuse could he give that wouldn't sound horrid?

When he arrived at her suite, the door was open, which was a relief. He wouldn't have to kick it in. She was in the bedroom, sitting on the edge of the mattress, her feet on the floor. There was a pile of clothing stacked on the bed, and she was wearing a cloak and bonnet and about to flee the premises.

As he stomped over to her, she stared blandly, as if he were a stranger.

He could be incredibly obtuse, and he uttered exactly the wrong comment. "You're not leaving."

"You are not my husband or my father, Lord Marston. You have no right to boss me, and I have no duty to listen to you."

"You are not calling me Lord Marston. Stop it."

"I won't, *Lord* Marston." She deliberately and snottily used his title.

He wasn't a man who fought or argued, and he particularly never argued with women. He barked orders and had them instantly obeyed, so her condescending retort enraged him. He grabbed the clothes, walked to the dressing room, and threw them inside.

"I repeat," he said as he spun around, "you're not leaving, so you can get that mad idea out of your head."

She stood and went over to the window. He followed her and tried to hold her hand, but she lurched away, almost as if she was afraid of him.

"Jackson has already summoned a carriage for us," she said.

"I don't give you permission to take one of my vehicles."

She ignored him. "I'll return it once I reach my destination."

He sighed with aggravation. "Hannah, we're departing for our wedding tomorrow!"

"No, we're not."

"Yes, we are! We've had our wedding night. We don't have any choice except to proceed."

"We always have choices," she sneered.

"I didn't know Nate and Isabella were planning to visit," he said. "I didn't invite them."

She shrugged. "Why would it matter if they were invited or not? They're your friends. Of course they would feel free to pop in and surprise you."

"I'm separating from Isabella," he pointed out, when he probably shouldn't have mentioned her. "My contract with her expires in a few weeks, but I'm terminating it immediately."

"Your contract!"

The manner in which she voiced the word *contract* made him flinch. He wallowed in iniquity, so he conveniently forgot how far he'd strayed beyond the bounds of civilized society. He forgot how a respectable person like Hannah would view his awful habits.

"Would you please calm down and let me explain?" he said.

"You assume I should suffer through an explanation?"

"You owe me that."

"No, I don't."

He pushed on, even though he was certain it wouldn't help. "I've always had a mistress. You're aware of that fact."

"Yes, and apparently, you're getting rid of poor Miss Darling, and you're picking someone else." She batted her lashes. "Isn't that special?"

His cheeks heated with chagrin. "I'm not picking anyone else."

"You're not?" She whacked her ear with her palm. "There must be something wrong with my hearing then, for I could swear that's what you and Mr. Carew were discussing."

"I wasn't going forward with the interviews. I was canceling them. For you!"

"Well, here's the problem I'm having with that statement, Lord Marston: I don't believe you. Not for a single second."

"Why would I lie?"

She laughed derisively. "Why would you *lie*? Shall I list some of the reasons? Were we really even heading to Scotland? Were we eloping? Or was this entire sojourn simply a ruse to seduce me?"

"Don't you dare accuse me of bad behavior."

"I think *bad* behavior is the only kind in which you ever engage."

It seemed as if they were speaking in different languages, circling around each other and never meeting in the middle. "Isabella and I are separating," he repeated, "and I won't replace her."

"You are laboring under the deluded impression that I care what happens between you and Miss Darling."

Footsteps sounded behind him, and Jackson entered the room. He was glaring at Hunter, and it was obvious the esteem he'd harbored had



been destroyed. He was carrying a portmanteau, and he gestured to her with it.

"I found this for you," he said, "and I've packed one for me. The carriage is in the driveway. Are you ready?"

"I had some clothes I was bringing," she informed him, "but Lord Marston threw them on the floor in the dressing room. Would you grab them for me? You don't need to fold them. Just stuff them in."

Hunter said to Jackson, "Don't pay any attention to her. The only trip she's taking is to Scotland in the morning."

"I'm sorry, Lord Marston," the little cretin said, "but you can't boss me in this."

He marched to the dressing room, and he was back in a minute with the portmanteau looking quite a bit heavier.

"Why won't you listen to me?" Hunter said to her.

"I *listened*," she replied, "when you were bragging to Mr. Carew about the interviews you're conducting, and evidently, you're not aware that Miss Darling visited me in my shop a few weeks ago."

His ire spiked to an even higher level. "She what?"

"She stopped by to bully me into staying away from you."

"You should have told me. I would have reined in her nonsense."

"Why would I have mentioned her to you? She's nothing to me, and I'm not afraid of her."

"She's crossed so many lines that I have no idea what to tell you."

"You know what, Lord Marston? I refuse to debate that hussy with you, except to say this: She apprised me that you were holding interviews for...a..." She halted and peeked at Jackson, then didn't finish her sentence. "Later on, I asked you if her story was true, and you lied right to my face."

His cheeks heated an even deeper shade of red. He was such a debauched wretch! "You're not being fair. How could I have explained it to you? I lied for your own good. I was pursuing a shameful scheme, and I couldn't bear to admit it."

"Precisely, Lord Marston," she said with an incredible amount of venom. "It's clear you're not the man I assumed you were."

"Yes, I am," he insisted, even though she'd discovered he wasn't.

She clucked her tongue with offense. "I've been grateful to you for your assistance after the fire, so I convinced myself you were decent and

honorable, but I'm sure it was a façade you used to trick me.”

“How have I tricked you? I'm dying to hear.”

She snorted with aggravation and nodded at Jackson. “My brother seems very mature, but he's still a boy, and I would never clarify in his presence what recently occurred.”

At the comment, Jackson bristled. “What did he do to you?”

He dropped the portmanteau, appearing as if he'd attack Hunter. Hunter was taller and larger, so Jackson wouldn't be able to inflict much damage, but Hunter wasn't about to brawl with him. The whole episode was too pathetic to be believed.

“It doesn't matter now,” she said to her brother, and her tone was very calm. “We just need to depart.”

She stomped out, but Jackson hesitated. He glowered at Hunter as if he'd like to throw a hard punch, but he thought better of it and traipsed after her.

Hunter felt as if he'd been turned to stone, but he shook himself out of his stupor and went after them. He'd never been treated so shabbily! Not by any female. They all loved him. They were all anxious to be his favorite. What was wrong with her?

He followed them out to the hall and called, “What if you're with child? What then?”

It was a horrid question to voice aloud, and Jackson inhaled a sharp breath and said to Hannah, “He seduced you?”

Hannah didn't respond to Jackson, but glared at Hunter over her shoulder. “If I wound up with child, you'd never have to fuss over it. I'd jump off a cliff before I'd beg you for help.”

Then they continued on, and Hunter hovered behind them, his head spinning, his temper hotter than it had ever been. He yearned to run after her, to fall to his knees and plead for her forgiveness. That had been his original plan, but she was so angry he hadn't had the chance to apologize.

Would he chase after her? Would he beseech her?

No. He *never* chased after women, and he wouldn't act like an even bigger fool. She didn't want to marry him? Well, to hell with her!

She was the one and only female to whom he'd ever offered the opportunity to be his bride, but she wasn't interested. He'd been candid about his vices and flaws, so why be enraged when she learned they

were genuine? He'd been betrothed for a single day. How was he to have rearranged his affairs in that short period? Why would she have expected him to?

She'd accused him of deceit and harm, but she was deranged, and once he calmed down, he'd realize he'd dodged a bullet.

She could totter off—and good riddance! He hadn't wanted to marry or have a wife. Not really. He had an enjoyable life in town, and it was time he got back to it.

He trudged to his suite and locked himself in. As her vehicle rolled away, the wheels crunched on gravel, but he didn't peek out to watch her go.

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The carriage rattled to a stop, and Hannah pulled on the curtain and glanced at the front doors of Parkhurst. To her great dismay, she'd ended up where she'd started. It was the very last place she should have come, but Parkhurst was home. It meant they had to welcome her when she staggered in.

No servant emerged to greet them or tend the horses, and it was a sign of the deteriorating conditions. The competent workers had fled years earlier, so Winston was surrounded by sluggards, idiots, and thieves.

She waited a minute, then a minute more, and one of Lord Marston's outriders helped them climb out. She thanked him and the other men who'd conveyed them to Parkhurst, suggesting they tarry for the night, but they were eager to travel on to Marston, even if it was in the dark.

She wished she could slip them a few coins as payment for their trouble, but her purse was empty. In fact, she didn't even have a purse.

She apologized profusely for her poverty-stricken state, but they were kind about it, insisting Lord Marston wouldn't like them to be compensated merely for aiding her. They retrieved Hannah and Jackson's bags, and one fellow offered to carry them in, but Hannah waved him away.

The men had a long journey ahead of them, and she wouldn't delay them further.

She and Jackson dawdled until they vanished in the trees, then they spun toward the manor. When she'd informed Jackson that their

destination would be Parkhurst, he'd asked only once if she was sure. She'd said she was, so he hadn't argued or tried to dissuade her. He'd simply supported her in her decision.

She constantly thought she had no allies, but she had some, and they were in London. She would write to her mentor, Sybil Jones, who managed the *Ralston's* gambling club. She would seek her advice. She would also write to her lawyer, Mr. Thumberton, and apprise him about the shop burning. She had to consult with him about her finances too.

There had to be a method to borrow from her dowry so she could rebuild. Why couldn't that be allowed? After her atrocious experience with Lord Marston, she had again embraced her resolve to never wed, so the money would sit there unused. Why couldn't it be spent in a productive way?

"Are you ready to go in?" Jackson said.

"I guess I am."

"They'll faint to have you arrive."

"Parkhurst is mine. No permission is required for me to return to it."

"If you need me to handle Winston for you, just tell me. I'll be happy to keep him in line."

"I'll be fine."

Jackson didn't believe her for a second, but then, in her dealings with Winston, she'd repeatedly acted like a blithering fool. But no more. Despite how she nagged at Mr. Thumberton about moving back to the city, she was likely stuck at Parkhurst, and she had to cease being such a ninny about it.

Winston couldn't continue wrecking it.

In the past, she'd been young and naïve and unable to stand up to him. He'd chased her away, but she'd changed—or maybe she'd finally grown up. When she'd stood outside Lord Marston's library, when he'd boasted to Mr. Carew that he would conclude his mistress interviews *after* his wedding, well...!

That was the absolute limit of enough.

She was fighting mad, and Hunter Stone was the last man who would ever trick or coerce her. Winston Webster had better watch out!

"Let's get this over with," she said to her brother.

They went to the stairs, and as they reached them, a window slammed open overhead. They peered up to find Rebecca leaning out.

“Hannah! Jackson!” she called down to them. “Am I glad to see you! Why are you here? Are you home for good?”

“I had some difficulties in town,” Hannah said, “so yes, I’m home for good.”

“Winston told us about your shop burning down.”

Hannah vaguely wondered how he’d have heard about it. Was he keeping track of her? Why would he?

“It’s a long story,” she said. “I’ll tell you about it at supper. Or have I missed supper?”

“I don’t know if it’s been served or not. Mother will have a tray brought up to my room.”

“Well, come down when you can. We’ll chat.”

“Could you do me a favor?” Rebecca asked. “I’ve been locked in since you left previously. Could you let me out?”

“You...what?”

“Mother is furious with me, so I’m being punished.”

Hannah had only imagined she was incensed, and her rage bubbled up like soup in a pot. It overflowed the rim and oozed out to scald the entire world.

“Someone will release you,” she said. “Just hold on. It will take me a moment to have it squared away.”

Hannah marched inside, Jackson hot on her heels, and there were two footmen loafing in the foyer. She wasn’t acquainted with either of them, so it meant they weren’t acquainted with her.

They were huddled together and perusing a small book. From how they were snickering, it probably contained risqué pictures. They were completely enthralled and hadn’t noticed that she’d entered.

“Excuse me.” She had to stamp her foot to get their attention.

They glanced over, clearly irritated at being interrupted, and one of them said, “May I help you?”

“You didn’t meet my carriage.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

The lazy cur smirked, and Jackson snapped, “Mind your manners!”

He stormed over and shoved the dolt so hard that he tripped and collapsed to the floor with a thud. He lurched up, feet braced, as if they’d engage in fisticuffs.

Hannah didn’t wait for any mischief to commence. “Both of you are

fired.”

“What?” they protested in unison, then the one who’d fallen said, “Now just a damned minute. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Jackson punched the idiot for cursing at her. The other one appeared as if he’d intervene, but Jackson warned, “I’d love to hit you too. Shall I?”

The butler rushed down the hall, and luckily, it was the same oaf who’d worked for them during her prior visit.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded as he skidded to a stop. “Miss Graves! Welcome back!”

“I’ve fired this pair of cretins,” Hannah told him. “I expect them to pack their belongings and vacate the premises immediately. Don’t let them tarry, and check their bags as they depart, so they don’t sneak out with any of the silver.”

She skirted by him and hurried up the stairs to Amelia’s boudoir, Jackson still dogging her. She burst into the room without knocking. Amelia was sprawled on the fainting couch, and Winston was pacing in front of her. They’d been arguing, which was their usual condition.

On observing her, they blanched with surprise. Winston flashed a smarmy smile, and Amelia pushed herself up to a sitting position.

“Hannah!” she said. “Why are you here? Did something bad happen in town?”

She and Winston exchanged a snide look, as if they shared a secret, but Hannah would have to decipher it later on. Her reply was, “Rebecca is locked in her bedchamber. Why?”

Amelia frowned in her vapid way. “I’m sure you’re mistaken.”

“Where is the key?”

Winston scoffed with disdain. “You have no right to barge in and spew orders about how Amelia is parenting Rebecca.”

Hannah kept her livid glower focused on Amelia, and, without peering over at Jackson, she said to him, “Find a burly footman, then go to Rebecca’s room and kick in the door. Bring her down to my suite, and I’ll meet you there. We’ll have supper with her, and she can fill us in on all the nonsense that’s recently been perpetrated.”

Jackson raced out as the butler raced in. Apparently, her dour mood had indicated she might stir more chaos.

“I have an announcement,” she said. Winston was about to chime in

with a stupid and insulting remark, but she didn't give him a chance. "I've come home to stay, and I shall reside in the manor. It means, Winston and Amelia, that you will not be residing in it with me. You will be moving to the Dower House."

Her proclamation landed like a heavy anvil. There was a shocked silence, then Winston and Amelia howled with offense. They called her cruel and horrid, they called her vicious and terrible, and they insisted they wouldn't obey.

She ignored them and said to the butler, "I want them out of the manor in three days, so have some servants pack their things. Also, get some housemaids over to the Dower House." The old place had been shuttered for over two decades. "They'll have to scrub and clean so it's habitable. If you can't accomplish all of it in three days, I'll fire the entire staff and hire people who understand who's in charge."

She swept out and went to her bedchamber to wait for Jackson and Rebecca.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I have to tell you something important. Actually, it’s two things.”

“After the horrors you’ve already imparted, I’m not certain I can bear it.”

Rebecca stared at Hannah, and she was crestfallen. She mumbled, “Perhaps we can discuss it later?”

“I was being facetious, Rebecca. Of course you should tell me.”

Hannah patted Rebecca’s hand, and Rebecca sighed with relief. She was positive Hannah would believe her and take her side. Jackson too. He would protect her—both from her mother and from Mr. Carew. Jackson was only fourteen, but he had a tough attitude, so she felt safe in his presence.

They were in Hannah’s bedroom suite, in the sitting room and seated at a table by the window. Jackson was standing in the corner like a vigilant sentinel. He’d freed her from her bedchamber by having a footman kick in her door, and ever since, she’d been huddled with her half-siblings.

Hannah had decided Winston and Amelia should retire to the old Dower House. The residence had been boarded up for decades. It was small and not fancy, so Winston was pitching a fit.

He kept knocking, demanding to be admitted, but the door was locked. Jackson had even pulled a dresser over to add weight in case Winston tried to force his way in. He was that angry, which scared Rebecca, but Hannah and Jackson weren’t scared, so she was struggling to exhibit the same brave façade.

“What is the first thing?” Hannah asked.

“Do you remember Mr. Carew? He is Viscount Marston’s friend.”

“Yes, I definitely remember him.”

“I don’t like him, and he wants me to elope with him.” It was such a blessing to speak the words aloud. She’d been holding them in for an eternity. “He’s been pressuring me, but it’s not right, is it? I’m frightened, and I can’t make him stop.”

At being informed about Mr. Carew, Hannah was furious. “How has



this been happening?"

"He visited after you left, and he's been secretly writing to me. A housemaid brings me his letters."

"He would have bribed her to be his accomplice," Jackson said. "He's the foul type who would."

Rebecca nodded. "He claims Mother is awful to me, and he can rescue me, but I think he'd just like to get his hands on my fortune. Don't you think that's it?"

"I'm sure it is," Hannah said. "When is he expecting this elopement to occur?"

"It was supposed to be last week. I had lied and pretended Mother would be away from Parkhurst and I could sneak away—merely so he'd quit bothering me. Now, he's coming on Saturday. I'm to join him out on the lane at midnight."

Hannah peered over at Jackson, and they shared a visual exchange she couldn't decipher. Then Jackson said, "Don't worry about Mr. Carew. I'll talk to him for you."

"I'll fire the housemaid too," Hannah said. "She shouldn't have helped him. Next time we're downstairs, point her out to me."

"Thank you. I feel better already."

"You mentioned two things," Hannah said. "What is the other one?"

"The second one is more difficult," Rebecca told her, "and I hope you won't hate me for it."

"I could never hate you," Hannah said. "We're sisters. You, Jackson, and I are siblings. We haven't bonded as we should have, but we'll build the relationship we deserve. So what is it?"

It was a lovely comment, and it should have calmed her, but it didn't. Hannah was glad they were sisters, but as Rebecca had discovered, they weren't sisters.

"Promise you won't blame me."

"I won't; I swear."

"Have you ever heard any of the rumors about Winston and my mother? The biggest one is that Sir Edmund isn't my father. That it's Winston."

"Yes, Rebecca, I've heard it for years, but I never believed it, and you shouldn't either."

"It's true though."

She couldn't hold Hannah's gaze, and she stared down at her lap, wondering if she'd wrecked everything. Would they still like her?

"Why are you suddenly assuming it's true?" Hannah asked.

"Mother was arguing with Winston, and I was out in the hall. Winston wants my share of Parkhurst, and he insists—if he announces he's my father—he can become my guardian and seize control of my dowry."

"Is there a chance you might have misconstrued his remark?"

"No, he was very clear. Later on, I nagged Mother about it, and she ordered me to never tell anyone, then she locked me in my room."

Hannah said, "Look at me, Rebecca."

Rebecca peeked up, and Hannah was smiling, which was a great relief.

"You're not upset with me?" Rebecca asked.

"If I'm upset, it's with Winston and your mother."

Rebecca blew out a heavy breath, figuring this would be the hard part. Once she mentioned the idea, it would float out into the world, and she wouldn't be able to retract it. "Parkhurst shouldn't be half mine. If Sir Edmund isn't my father, then it should belong to you and Jackson. You're his children. Not me."

"We don't know that for sure," Hannah said.

"I've never liked owning Parkhurst. It seems like such a burden." She asked Jackson, "Would you like to own it with Hannah? I think you'd be a very good owner."

He chuckled in a kind way, as if it was a humorous question, as if she was joking. "Yes, I would like to own Parkhurst. Sir Edmund was hideous to my mother, and it would be some just desserts. If it ever happened though, we'd probably have him rolling in his grave."

"Let's not speak ill of the dead." Hannah's tone was scolding.

He shrugged. "I never met the man, and I like the notion of vexing him."

"Jackson!" Hannah said more sternly.

Rebecca couldn't bear to have them fight, and she said to Jackson, "If I gave you my half, would you allow me to live here?"

"Yes, you could live here forever. I'd always take care of you." He paused and frowned. "In fact, I'll take care of you whether it's mine or not."

"I would simply like to stay at Parkhurst," she said. "It's all I need to be happy. And maybe I could start a school in the south wing of the manor? I liked attending school so much, and I would like for other girls to have the same opportunity. Mother and Winston would have to leave though. If they were nearby, they'd ruin it."

"You wouldn't mind if I made them leave?" Hannah asked. "You're certain?"

"I'd be very glad!"

"Then I'll get this squared away with your mother," Hannah said. "I should travel to London and confer with our attorney, Mr. Thumberton, too. I should file court papers, so Amelia and Winston have no authority over you. Would you like that?"

Rebecca grinned from ear to ear. "That would be the best ending of all."

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"I heard the most bizarre rumor about you."

"Then I'm sure it must be true."

Hunter glared at his father, then went over to the sideboard to pour himself a whiskey. There was a servant hovering who could have poured it for him, but his nerves were too jittery. He had to stand and move around, perhaps even sneak out so he didn't start a quarrel. His mood was that foul.

Neville had spent most of his life loafing and gambling, and if Hunter needed to speak with him, to ask him a question, or simply check on how he was faring, he had to search for him at his favorite haunts.

What did it say about their father/son bond that a gambling club was the place they normally conversed? And why did Hunter oblige him?

They were in a private room at *Ralston's*, the posh, exclusive establishment run by Sybil Jones. They were expecting several of Neville's dissolute friends to join them, but so far, he and his father were alone. Once the older men were present, Hunter would slip away, but where would he go?

He was surly and grouchy, worried about Hannah, but trying *not* to worry about her too. There was still a ton of fondness roiling him, and he didn't know how to quell it or expel it. Because he was in such a

wretched state, his usual entertainments held no appeal.

How was he to amuse himself on a Saturday night in town? He didn't care to wager, chase tarts, or carouse with his degenerate acquaintances. He most especially didn't want to bump into Nate or Isabella. Since he'd returned to London, he hadn't talked to them, and he didn't intend to talk to them. He'd penned a letter to Isabella, advising her to vacate his house by the following Tuesday.

He hoped she'd depart without a fight, but Nate had been correct in pointing out that she'd grown much too attached. He hated to bicker, but he'd never set her straight about her possessiveness when he should have.

His father interrupted his pathetic reverie. "Aren't you curious about the rumor I mentioned? A little birdy told me you nearly eloped."

"If you're giving credence to a story like that, it's clear you have too much time on your hands."

"Are you denying it?"

"No. I'm simply suggesting you mind your own business."

"Why did you rush to the country? You never apprised me."

"I'm not going to apprise you either. You might be my father, but you're not my guardian or my vicar. You don't get to have an opinion as to how I occupy myself."

"You seem dreadfully grumpy. Can you manage to generate a smile for me? If you plan to glower and mope, you'll ruin my fun."

"Heaven forbid," Hunter muttered.

He wondered where Hannah was. He'd left Marston before his servants had brought back the carriage she'd borrowed, so he hadn't learned her destination.

He was such a self-centered ass that he hadn't delved into her personal life. Had she friends with whom she could stay? Were there relatives, other than Amelia and Winston Webster, who might have welcomed her?

He was terrified she'd staggered to Parkhurst, which would be reckless and idiotic. She knew better, and he couldn't bear to imagine her being there by herself. How might a fiend like Winston Webster harm her?

As quickly as the chilling question arose, he shoved it away. Her negligent choices weren't any of his affair, and if she'd landed herself in

a jam, it wasn't his problem.

Then he winced. She was a silly female who should have a strong, assertive male by her side to keep her out of trouble. Would he leave her to her own devices? Would he abandon her when she likely needed him the most?

Neville, for all his foibles and faults, was a shrewd character. He asked, "Why are you pouting over in the corner? Sit down and explain what's vexing you. Perhaps I can help."

Hunter laughed derisively. "When were you ever a *help* to anyone?"

"Sit!" Neville said more sternly, and like a chastened boy, Hunter lurched over and plopped down.

"I have no idea why I obey you."

Neville ignored the insult. "Who was the girl? You almost saddled me with a daughter-in-law, so I think I have the right to inquire."

Who had tattled to his father? It had to be a servant, and the notion was exhausting. He wasn't ten!

"If you must know," he said, "it was Hannah Graves."

"I thought you were disgusted by the whole bloody family."

"I was. I am."

"From how you're sulking, you must be completely smitten. Shall I contact Mrs. Webster? Would you like me to negotiate a contract?"

Hunter had just taken a sip of his liquor, and it went down wrong. He coughed and pounded on his chest. "No, you shouldn't contact that deranged lunatic, and you're not finding me a bride."

"What happened at Marston? Why aren't you married?"

"Well, Isabella and Nate traveled to the country to visit me without an invitation. Hannah was a tad upset at having come face to face with my mistress."

"Isabella dared to visit without asking?" Neville clucked his tongue. "I never liked her, and must I remind you that you have to keep your various women in their proper spots? Chaos ensues when you don't."

Sybil entered the room to check on them, and she pulled up a chair at their table. "I have some amazing news that will astound you," she said. "Caleb is giving me the club—lock, stock, and barrel. He's signing over his entire interest to me."

Caleb Ralston was Hunter's same age of thirty, a former navy sailor who'd retired, then had started the gambling club to support himself.

Sybil had been his guardian when he was a boy, so she was a sort of mother figure to him. Or maybe—with her being only forty herself—she was more like a devoted older sibling.

Neville scowled. “What brought this on?”

She shrugged. “He married Caroline Grey, and she refuses to have a husband who earns his income from an indecent venture.”

Neville’s jaw dropped in astonishment. “But the two of you have grown so rich. He’s relinquishing all that money for a...a...woman?”

“Yes, Neville. Fancy that. He’s madly in love and can’t live without her. She delivered an ultimatum: the club or her. And he picked her.”

“That is ridiculous.”

Sybil rolled her eyes. “It’s about love and romance, so you wouldn’t understand.”

Neville huffed. “I understand plenty about romance. After all, I’ve spent my life flirting and wooing, but what I *don’t* understand is why a man would allow a female to lead him by the nose. Caleb will regret it forever.”

“I doubt it,” Sybil said. “He’s quite besotted.”

Neville had to pontificate. “Women are never worth the sacrifices men make for them.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that,” Sybil sarcastically replied.

Hunter said to her, “I’m happy for you. You’re marvelous, and this is a fabulous windfall.”

“I’m still coming to grips with it,” she said. “I’m certain it won’t be too long before men begin complaining that I’ve overstepped my place.”

Hunter grinned. “They already complain about that.”

She raised a caustic brow. “If they don’t like me being the proprietor, they don’t have to wager here. They can fritter away their fortunes somewhere else.”

She poured herself a glass of liquor, and she and Hunter clinked the rims together.

“Speaking of romance,” Neville said.

“Were we?” Sybil asked.

Neville pointed at Hunter. “My oldest son and heir nearly eloped last week.”

“Neville!” Hunter scolded. “Be silent. I don’t need you blabbing my secrets all over the city.”

“Sybil would never gossip about our private business.”

Sybil turned to Hunter and said, “Why were you eloping? You’re next in line to be Earl of Swindon. Why not hold a huge service at the cathedral?”

“I was afraid—if we delayed so she could think about having me as her husband—she’d never proceed. She had an extra day to ponder the consequences of being my wife, and she ran for the hills.”

“Smart girl,” Sybil muttered. “Who was she? Anyone I know?”

“Yes, you know her. Hannah Graves?”

Sybil blanched. “You were eloping with Miss Graves?”

“Ah...yes?”

Neville butted in with, “She considered the prospect, then told him to sod off.”

“She never told me that!” Hunter fumed.

“What did you do to her?” Sybil had venom in her voice.

“Nothing,” Hunter insisted, but his cheeks heated with embarrassment.

Sybil scoffed. “Don’t flash that innocent look at me. You Stone men are such miserable rogues. Tell me the truth. What did you do?”

“Her shop burned to the ground.”

“Oh, no!” Sybil said. “I hadn’t heard.”

“She lived in the apartment on the second floor, and she and her brother barely escaped the inferno. She lost everything, and she was extremely distraught. I merely took her to Marston Manor, so she could rest and regroup.”

When he put it like that, it sounded rather chaste and noble, but Sybil wasn’t buying it.

“You seduced her while she was there?”

Hunter tried to appear offended by the question. “Who said I seduced her?”

“You’re Neville’s son, so don’t pretend to be virtuous. It won’t work with me. What happened?”

“Without warning, Isabella Darling showed up.”

“Miss Darling came to Marston?” Sybil asked. “What’s wrong with her?”

Neville and Sybil shook their heads with disgust. A tart like Isabella *never* arrived unannounced because there was no predicting who might

be in residence.

Hunter would be the first to agree it wasn't fair to Isabella or the other doxies who wallowed in the demimonde, but they chose to carry on there. Decent people never socialized with them.

"Isabella stopped by here a bit ago," Sybil stunned him by saying. "She was searching for you."

Hunter's temper flared. "She stopped here? At the club?"

"Yes, but my guard at the door sent her away."

It was a men's club, with no females ever permitted inside, except for Sybil, so Isabella was becoming more deranged by the minute.

"I apologize," Hunter said. "She shouldn't have bothered you. I'll speak to her."

"It seems to me that you have some issues to address with her."

"Our contract is about to expire, so she and I are almost finished."

"I don't care about Miss Darling," Sybil said, "but I am concerned about Miss Graves. What's your plan with regard to her?"

"I have no plan."

"Where is she?"

"I...I..." He cut off. "I suppose she went home to her estate in the country. It's called Parkhurst."

"You're not sure of her whereabouts?" Sybil was incredibly irked. "You didn't check? Why not?"

"We parted company, and she was very clear in her opinion of me. She believes I'm a debauched wretch, and she wants no further contact."

Sybil nodded. "You are a wretch; I heartily concur."

"I'm not a glutton for punishment, and I won't chase after any woman. I tendered a valid marriage proposal, and she wasn't interested. I won't beg her to have me."

"You're forgetting one pertinent fact," Sybil glared until he squirmed in his seat. "She's not some trollop you can use for carnal sport, then toss away. Her father was an important man in this kingdom, and he had powerful friends. They would never like to discover you were awful to her. Neither would I."

"It's not as if I will run about blabbing the news. No one will ever guess what occurred."

"Your father knows, and he can't keep a secret to save his life."

Neville lifted a brow. "She's correct. I can't."



“Hannah Graves won’t marry me!” Hunter wished they’d listen, but of course, they didn’t.

“Haven’t you learned anything from me?” Neville said. “You never let a woman decide for you on any subject. Why would you imagine it should be up to Miss Graves whether you wed her or not?”

“Precisely,” Sybil said, “so I suggest you get your sorry behind to Parkhurst and try again. If you won’t, your father will start to meddle, which would be a disaster.”

Hunter snorted. “Neville has no authority over Miss Graves, and there’s no man who could boss her. She’s contrary and stubborn.”

“I can’t stand to see women treated badly,” Sybil said. “If you don’t fix this, I’ll be so disappointed.”

She stood and left, and he felt like vermin, like dung in the gutter, and he’d like to wring Hannah’s neck. *He* had been perfectly willing to proceed. She was the one who’d quailed in terror and had fled. Why was it his obligation to fix the mess?

Well, he knew why. Matrimony was the man’s burden, the man’s choice, and Hunter had ruined her. He couldn’t argue over that dicey problem.

There was a whiskey decanter on the table, and Neville reached for it and refilled their glasses.

“Are you off to Parkhurst?” Neville asked. “Are there wedding bells in your future? And before you answer, I should inform you that Sybil can be an absolute beast in getting her way. Miss Graves is her friend, so she will sink her teeth into your backside, and she won’t release you until you’ve slid a ring onto Miss Graves’s finger.”

“You make it sound easy, but you haven’t met Miss Graves.”

“Women are simple creatures,” Neville said, “so it takes scant effort to coax them into giving you what you require, and you have all of my charm. I have no doubt you can persuade her.”

“I don’t want to persuade her.”

It was a huge lie. He merely wanted her to be happy, to not think he was appalling, to be glad she’d won him for her very own, but *she* didn’t want any of that.

He rose and headed out, and Neville said, “Send a messenger after you’ve convinced her, and don’t elope. I should like to attend the ceremony. I expect your brother, Warwick, to stagger home shortly, and

he'll insist on attending too. You can't finish it without us."

"I haven't agreed that I'll travel to Parkhurst."

Neville snickered with amusement. "Go out to the gaming room and apprise Sybil that you won't mend this. Let's hear her opinion as to what you owe Miss Graves."

Usually, Hunter assumed Neville was a lazy cur, but occasionally, he could be extremely devious. He'd decreed that Hunter should shackle himself quickly to secure the title, and this seemed to be the ultimate coercion. Would Hunter succumb to it?

"Are you claiming I should marry Hannah because I seduced her? When have you ever thought a man should step up and behave appropriately? You're not exactly a role model."

"I'm not saying that. It's just that I know you too well. You're like me in some ways, but you're not like me in others. You, at least, *try* to conduct yourself with a modicum of dignity. I never try." Neville sipped his whiskey, looking cunning and deceitful. "What if she's with child? Have you considered that? She could be carrying the next Viscount Marston."

"Don't remind me!"

He stomped out, his father's laughter echoing in his ears.

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Hannah marched up to the door of the Dower House and briskly knocked.

She had to meet with Winston and Amelia, and numerous topics had to be addressed. Namely, Hannah had to wrest control of Rebecca from Amelia so they could never browbeat or coerce her again.

While she waited for someone to answer, she checked out the shrubbery and flowerboxes. The residence hadn't been used for many years, and as with so much at Parkhurst, Hannah should have been a better caretaker. She was embarrassed to have been such a pathetic landlord. Who would permit a perfectly good house to go to waste?

It was small and cozy, warm in the winter and cool in the summer, with large windows and sturdy chimneys. A normal couple would have been delighted to live in it, but Winston and Amelia weren't normal, and as a lodging, it was quite a step down from the manor.

They would never forgive her for finally yanking the property out of

their greedy hands. Nor would they ever stop undermining her. So far, there had been many difficult days of vicious arguments, but ultimately, Hannah had won the fight, and they'd moved.

Next, she had to chase them away from the estate. Permanently. She hadn't deduced how she'd do it, and she'd likely have to pay for their departure, but she was determined to accomplish it.

She knocked again, then opened the door on her own.

Three servants had been ordered to tend them. None of the staff had wanted the job, so she'd drawn straws to see who would be forced to accept the assignment. Even then, she'd had to promise to rotate people in and out before they'd agree. Winston and Amelia were that despised.

Events had exhausted her. Strife and chores had exhausted her.

After discussions with the housekeeper, she'd fired half the servants for various transgressions from sloth to petty theft. Then she'd sent a message into the village that any prior staff who'd like their positions back should apply, but Parkhurst had developed such a vile reputation that no one had shown up.

It was bad enough that she'd been seduced by a cad, but she'd staggered home with a broken heart and was having to deal with issues she'd neglected for too long. She simply wished she could curl into a ball and ponder Hunter Stone. She needed some quiet hours to reflect on what had occurred.

Had she really almost married him? What had come over her?

She assumed she was a shrewd judge of character, but clearly, she'd been out of her depth with him. She was trying not to be too hard on herself though. He was so charming, and he was a notorious flirt, so she'd been an easy target.

Her main problem was that she'd grown so fond, and there were too many emotions swirling inside her. They would gradually fade, but they hadn't faded yet, so she was lovelorn and morose. Whenever a carriage passed by out on the lane, her pulse would race, as she wondered if it would be Hunter, if he was arriving to mend their rift.

But why would she hope he'd mend it? What was wrong with her?

She scrutinized the foyer, liking how it had been cleaned and readied, but she couldn't hear a single sound. The place seemed deserted, and she called, "Hello, is anybody home?"

She listened, but there was no response. She wandered through the

parlors, assessing the conditions, and being satisfied with the work.

At the end of the hall, there was a tiny den. She peeked in, expecting it to be empty, but Winston was sitting at the desk. It was littered with papers, and he was furiously scribbling. She had no desire to speak to him alone, and she would have snuck out, but he glanced up and saw her.

“Well, well,” he sneered, “if it isn’t the High-and-Mighty Miss Hannah. Are you pleased with yourself? Would your imperious father, the sainted Sir Edmund, be pleased? Have you inflicted yourself on his poor widow quite enough?”

He was an expert at histrionics, at making Hannah feel guilty, but she was older and wiser now. He didn’t have as much success as he’d had in the past, and the situation enraged him.

“I have a question for you,” she said, ignoring his taunts.

“Ask away, Hannah.” His tone was very snide. “As always, I am completely at your service.”

Without preamble, she said, “Are you Rebecca’s father?”

A flame of ire ignited in his eyes, but he tamped it down. “Yes, I’m her father. Isn’t that the rumor that’s circulated among these provincial idiots who are your neighbors?”

She couldn’t decide if he was telling the truth or not. “Are you scoffing at the gossip or verifying it?”

“Why must you embarrass both of us?”

She noticed that he hadn’t specifically denied it. “Rebecca eavesdropped when you were talking about it to Amelia. Just once in your pitiful life, I’d like you to be honest with me.”

“Maybe Rebecca should shut her mouth and mind her own business.”

“She looks like you.”

A muscle ticked in his cheek, his hatred oozing out as he admitted, “Yes, she’s mine, and I am ready to announce it so Parkhurst will belong to me.”

“You’re such a liar. Should I believe you or not?”

“I’m her father and why wouldn’t I be?” His expression was all innocence. “Amelia has been obsessed with me since she was a child, and she loathed Sir Edmund.”

“She definitely deserves you,” Hannah mockingly said.

“Yes, she does,” he replied, not noting her sarcasm, “and with how devoted I’ve been, I should have control over Rebecca. Not that fusspot lawyer who hoards her money. I will wrest it away from him. I swear I will.”

Hannah was slowly sidling over to the desk, anxious to catch a glimpse of what he was writing. When she got close enough, she was shocked to realize he was penning her name—Miss Hannah Graves—over and over, as if he was practicing it.

To her great consternation, he was copying her handwriting exactly.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “You’re so devious that I’m almost afraid to inquire.”

“How is your pathetic little shop? So sad about your fire.”

“Why would you know about it?”

“I started it, of course.”

“*You* started it?” Again, she wasn’t certain what to believe. He was such a wily fiend, and he might be boasting of arson simply to incense her. “Why would you have bestirred yourself?”

“For the insurance money. Why would you suppose?”

“I had no insurance policy on the building.”

“Oh, but I did. I collected a fortune too, so thank you.”

A shiver ran down her spine. She remembered an odd letter she’d received when she’d still been at Marston about an insurance man who’d been overheard saying her claim would be paid in full. Since she’d had no policy, she’d assumed it must have been a different owner.

But Winston had taken out a policy? Winston had burned down her shop to collect on it?

“Why are you writing my name over and over?” she asked.

“I’ve learned to forge your signature.”

“Have you gone stark raving mad?”

“No, my mind is clearer than it’s ever been. I can put it on deeds, contracts, and other documents, without having to debate with you.”

The hair stood up on the back of her neck. Over the years, she’d had many contentious meetings with him. The past few days had been particularly combative, and he had to have recognized that—if she kept stripping him of his position and authority—he’d have nothing left.

He was like a trapped animal, and a trapped animal could be very dangerous. She hadn’t expected the house to be empty, but it was, so

they were alone. She didn't like to think she was in any genuine peril, but alarm bells were ringing in her head that she should flee. Immediately.

He grinned a tad evilly and said, "We've been quarreling, so I shouldn't pester you, but I need a favor."

"What is it?"

"Would you give me your share of Parkhurst?"

Hannah smirked. "No, and you're deranged to suggest it."

"That's the answer I anticipated, but you should consider a bit more carefully. You hate Parkhurst and I crave it."

"You're scaring me, Winston, and I'm not sure you're well, so I'm returning to the manor. We can discuss this later, when you're feeling better."

"No, no, wait! I have a curiosity to show you. You'll like it; I promise."

He went to a shelf on the wall, and when he came back toward her, he was holding some papers, as if he'd like her to read them. But before she grasped his intent, she saw that he was clutching some sort of metal rod too. He whacked her alongside the head with it, and the blow knocked her off balance, so she collapsed into the desk.

As she tried to steady herself, he hit her again even harder, and she fell to the floor in a stunned heap. She commanded her body to jump up and rush out, but she was totally disoriented, and she couldn't move a muscle.

Winston leaned down and murmured, "Sorry, Hannah, but we can't continue on like this."

Footsteps sounded, and Amelia strolled in. "Winston! What have you done?"

"Help me tie her up," he said. "Then we'll throw her down in the wine cellar until after dark. We have to figure out how to get rid of her without being observed."

"Is she...she... dead?" Amelia nervously asked.

"Not yet," Winston responded.

He swung his fist down again, and after that, Hannah didn't remember anything at all.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Hunter trotted down the lane toward Parkhurst. His brother, Warwick, was with him for a change. Warwick had gone to a party in Scotland, and he'd enjoyed himself so much that he'd tarried for three months. He'd strolled in the door at Hunter's London house, just as Hunter was preparing to depart for the country.

When Hunter had explained his mission, Warwick had insisted on joining in. He was vastly amused by Neville's demand that Hunter wed quickly, and he was dying to meet the woman who was about to become Mrs. Hunter Stone. Hunter couldn't convince him to stay in town or that there would probably be no *convincing* Hannah of anything.

He liked having Warwick as company. They shared the same opinions and attitudes, and they viewed every situation exactly the same. Their minds moved in tandem, and they often finished each other's sentences.

They were a year apart in age, so Warwick was twenty-nine to Hunter's thirty. They looked enough alike to be twins—brawny stature, blond hair, blue eyes—and people usually assumed they were.

They were alike in other ways too: temperament, upbringing, and army service. They'd grown up at Neville's country estate, with their brother, Sheridan, a trio of rowdy, unsupervised terrors who'd carried on like street orphans, even though they'd had a parent. Neville had been such a negligent father that it had seemed as if they were raised without one.

"What if I don't like her?" Warwick asked, referring to Hannah.

"You'll like her," Hunter said.

"That's not an answer, so would you please focus? If I don't like her, should I jump in and dissuade you?"

"You can't dissuade me. I ruined her, remember?"

"Yes, and you're being so gallant about it. I'm completely flummoxed by witnessing such honorable conduct. It's making me dizzy."

Hunter shrugged off Warwick's remark. "I will admit, just to you,

that I might be totally besotted too, but that's the one and only time I'll confess it."

"Now we've arrived at the heart of the matter. If you're besotted, well..."

"I feel as if I should try to persuade her, but I can't fathom how I will. I've never been particularly eloquent."

"I could vouch for your character."

Hunter sputtered with amusement. "She's heard the rumors—and believes them—so she'd never accept a testimonial from you."

"I could tell some really good lies. I'm ready to pitch in however I can."

"It wouldn't help." Hunter peered over at him and said, "Neville is about to start nagging at you too. He's eager to have all three of us married."

Warwick scoffed with derision. "That's hilarious news, and somehow, I can't picture Neville mustering the energy to badger anyone."

"It worked on me. I guess I'm too British because I was riveted by words like *secure the title* and *protect our line*."

"You can protect whatever you like. There's no need for me to copy your insanity."

"The men in our family don't have much luck living past thirty. What if I suddenly cock up my toes? You'd have to take my place."

Warwick gave a mock shudder. "If that's the case, I will do my utmost to guard your back so you're always hale and healthy."

They rode out of the trees, and the manor rose up before them. It was a fine residence. Not anywhere near as grand as Marston Manor, and there were definite signs of neglect: ivy that hadn't been trimmed, flowerbeds that hadn't been raked, grass that hadn't been swathed.

"It's not a bad property," Warwick said, after some silent scrutiny. "It could use a bit of maintenance though."

"Marston is nicer."

"This will be yours after you're wed?"

"Half-mine. Her younger sister owns the other half."

"Oh, that's right. What father would arrange such a peculiar bequest? What lawyer would structure it like that? Will you sell your share?"



“Hannah is attached to it, so I have no idea what she’ll want.”

He was chatting as if he and Hannah were still engaged, as if they hadn’t quarreled, as if she hadn’t left him in a tempestuous fury.

“Are you sure she’s here?” Warwick asked.

“No, I’m not sure.”

“If she didn’t travel to Parkhurst, what’s your plan to locate her?”

“I’d like to hope her relatives will know where she is, but I won’t count on it. Wait until you meet them. I’ve never crossed paths with a sorrier bunch.”

They continued on up the driveway and, without much of a delay, a stable boy loped up and took their horses. Just as Hunter surrendered his animal, the front doors burst open, and Jackson rushed out. He was gripping a metal fireplace poker as if he was about to swing it and hit somebody.

“Lord Marston!” he called. “Am I glad to see you!”

“It’s nice to see you too. With you being at Parkhurst, I assume Hannah is with you.” Hunter gestured to his brother. “This is my brother, Warwick. Warwick, this is Hannah’s brother, Jackson Graves, and he’s a sly little fiend. Watch out for him and keep track of your purse. He’s precisely the sort of petty criminal who might pick your pocket.”

Hunter had voiced the comment in jest, thinking it would make Jackson smile, but it didn’t, and he barely glanced at Warwick.

“Come inside,” he said, “and I’ll explain what’s occurred.”

“Uh-oh,” Warwick muttered. “That doesn’t sound good.”

They went into the foyer, and Jackson had a housemaid and two footmen sitting on the bottom step of the staircase. They were obviously terrified, as if he’d threatened them with the poker and they were certain he’d proceed with a thrashing. Rebecca was looming over them, as if she might join in any melee Jackson commenced.

Jackson provided an abbreviated update of Hannah’s difficult arrival at Parkhurst, how they’d found Rebecca locked in her room, how Hannah had kicked Winston and Amelia Webster out of the manor and had forced them to move to the old Dower House.

Then Jackson said, “She seems to have vanished.”

Hunter scowled. “What do you mean?”

“I spoke to her at breakfast, but she disappeared after we ate. It was

afternoon before I noticed she was missing.”

“What could have happened to her?”

“I can’t guess, but I’ve been questioning the servants, and this lot”—he nodded derisively—“is the last of them. The entire staff is naught but a group of sluggards, so I’m not sure if any of them are being truthful.” He waved the poker, and the trio blanched with alarm. “I’m happy to pound it out of them if I have to.”

Hunter spun to the servants, positive he could be much more intimidating than a fourteen-year-old boy, even if he was brandishing a weapon.

“Who would like to start?” Hunter asked.

One of the footmen said, “I saw her this morning shortly after eleven. She was walking toward the Dower House.”

Jackson bristled. “Why didn’t you tell us? We’ve been frantic for hours!”

“I was on my way to the village to run errands for the butler, then I popped in to visit my mother, so I was delayed in returning. I didn’t realize there was a problem until just now.”

“Did any of the rest of you see her after that?” Hunter asked.

They shook their heads, and Hunter looked at Jackson and said, “Let’s go have a chat with Mr. Webster.”

Rebecca said, “I’m coming with you.”

But Jackson piped up before Hunter could. “No, you stay here. We can’t be away from the manor at the same time. Who can predict what mischief these sloths might implement if we were both away?”

Hunter was liking Jackson more and more. “Take me there,” he said to the boy, “and be quick about it.”

“Should we bring a pistol?” Warwick asked.

They each had one strapped to their saddles, and they carried them when they were traveling, but Hunter said, “We don’t need a pistol. Winston Webster is a weasel and a coward. There’s no reason to be afraid of him.”

Jackson wagged the poker at Warwick. “I have this. If Mr. Webster has hurt her, I’ll beat him bloody.”

He whipped away and marched out the door, Hunter and Warwick dogging his heels.

As they hurried after him, Warwick murmured, “I thought this whole

trip would be a boring slog. Will there be fisticuffs? It's been awhile since I've had a chance to punch someone."

"I can't imagine what we'll find," Hunter replied, "but if Hannah has been harmed, we'll do quite a bit more than punch Winston Webster."

"Will we kill him?"

"Yes."

"Marvelous! It's been awhile since I murdered anyone too."

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Winston was seated at the desk in his den, while Amelia paced and nervously wrung her hands.

"I feel awful about this," she said, "and I hate to have Hannah injured. We're not violent people. There must have been a better way to deal with her."

"I'm weary of debating the issue. You're aware of how recalcitrant she's been. What option was left to us? She's already tossed us out of the manor, and I have no doubt her next move would be to throw us out on the road."

"I can't picture her acting that badly."

"I can," he fumed. "How could we have stopped her? Were you willing to risk being evicted?"

"But to hit her! To tie her up! I'm very bewildered by our ultimate goal, Winston. What is your plan?"

He glared at her, then shifted his focus to the desk. He was drafting a letter to that snooty lawyer, Thumberton, but she kept interrupting. He was imitating Hannah's handwriting, so Thumberton would think it had been penned by her, and Winston had to concentrate.

He'd collected the insurance money on Hannah's building, and he'd given most of it to the villains who were threatening him. It had bought him an extra month to come up with the balance, which he fully intended to do.

He would pretend to be Hannah and would inform Thumberton she was transferring title to Winston—who would be an excellent caretaker. Then he'd write to Thumberton in his own hand and make the announcement about Rebecca's paternity.

As her acknowledged father, he would be able to seize control of her dowry assets. In a few weeks, he was certain he would have the

situation resolved, and he refused to suppose he wouldn't.

With his finally vanquishing Hannah, he was in a manic state, his mind racing, his pulse elevated, so he was feverish and agitated. He felt omnipotent, as if he could commit any atrocity with impunity.

He'd never previously pummeled a woman, and it had been such a satisfying experience. Why had he waited so long to use physical force against her? After he had, it had been so easy to gain her compliance.

He'd knocked her unconscious, had bound and gagged her, then he and Amelia had dragged her down to the wine cellar. She was still there, and she would remain there until after dark. And then...?

Amelia wanted to free her and couldn't understand why they didn't dare. A grave had to be dug in the woods, so he could dispose of Hannah's body. He'd expected to have Amelia's assistance, but as usual, she was proving herself weak and feckless.

Perhaps he should rid himself of her too. Once he owned Parkhurst, why would he need Amelia? He couldn't conceive of a single reason. She would have to suffer a tidy accident, and he'd be a widower, one who was a landed gentleman. Then he'd wed a woman who was worthy of being his bride.

"May I take Hannah some tea and biscuits?" Amelia asked. "What is your opinion? I'd like to check on her."

Winston slammed a palm on the desktop. "We're not checking! How many times must I explain this to you?"

"I'm trying to behave more rationally than you. She'll be very angry over your vicious conduct, and I should calm her down."

"Would you like to untie her and bring her upstairs? What would happen then? Would we simply go about our business as if nothing has occurred?"

Amelia frowned. "I'm sure she'll be very upset with you."

"With *us*, Amelia! Not just me! We could wind up in legal jeopardy for assaulting her. Now be quiet and let me finish this letter."

He'd dipped his quill in the ink pot when there was a loud bang out at the front of the house. Commotion erupted in the foyer.

"Where is Mr. Webster?" an irate man asked one of the servants, but Winston couldn't hear the reply. He blanched, wondering if the moneylenders had arrived to thrash him again.

Booted strides echoed in the hall as several people marched toward

them, and he glanced over at Amelia and hissed, “Keep your mouth shut! No matter what.”

She jumped from her chair and skittered to the corner, as if she could hide there. He leapt up too, yearning for an escape route, but the only exit was through the door that led into the hall. He searched the desktop and picked up a letter opener, thinking he could use it as a knife to protect himself.

As to Amelia, she was on her own.

A burly blond man burst in first, and it was Viscount Marston. Winston was incredibly confused by the sight. Why would the noble scoundrel be at Parkhurst?

A second man entered behind him, and he looked so much like Hunter Stone that he was either Stone’s twin or Winston was seeing double. The little cretin, Jackson Graves, strutted in too, and though it was bizarre, he was clutching a fireplace poker.

“Where is Hannah?” Lord Marston demanded.

Winston was shocked to have Marston inquire about her, and he peeked over at Amelia before he could stop himself. He had to appear guilty as sin. Marston stomped across the room, and Winston held out the letter opener, wielding it like a weapon.

“Stay where you are!” he warned.

Marston simply yanked it away and flicked it over his shoulder. Then he grabbed Winston by his shirt and lifted him, so they were nose to nose, his feet dangling off the floor.

“Where is she?” Marston said again.

Winston scoffed. “How would I know? I haven’t talked to the pathetic shrew since yesterday.”

Marston didn’t appreciate the slur against Hannah, and he tossed Winston away as if he weighed no more than a feather. Winston crashed into the wall and fell with a hard thud that knocked the air out of his lungs. He curled into a ball and struggled to breathe.

He ordered himself to rise, to fight back, but his limbs wouldn’t obey.

Jackson advanced on Amelia, and Winston could only watch helplessly as Jackson brandished the poker and said, “I don’t like you, and I would love to wallop you with this, so I will ask you this question once. If you don’t answer me, I will beat you to within an inch of your

life. I'll enjoy it too. Where is Hannah?"

The fiend was eager to start pounding on Amelia. She was trembling and had been rendered speechless.

"Amelia! Be silent!" Winston forced out, but while he'd wanted to sound commanding, his lungs were still barely functioning, so the words came out in a whisper.

Suddenly, Amelia looked over at the door, and she screamed with fright. Winston looked over too, and a ghost seemed to be standing there, one that might have just climbed out of the grave. It was covered in muck and blood, its clothes dirty and torn, a hand reaching out toward them.

He blinked and blinked again, realizing it wasn't a ghost at all, but a very battered Hannah. Apparently, as he'd been blithely forging letters and plotting where to dig her grave after he strangled her to death later in the evening, she'd been escaping from the wine cellar where she'd been imprisoned.

How had she managed it? And why had Winston foolishly let her live for as long as he had? Why hadn't he killed her after he'd hauled her down to the cellar?

The problem was that he had no prior experience with homicide, so he had no rules to guide him. He'd intended to do it after dark, which had seemed a more suitable hour to commit that type of crime.

Why couldn't anything go as he planned? It had been the story of his life!

Hannah swayed in the doorway, and Marston's twin muttered, "What the hell is that?"

Then Marston said, "Oh, my Lord! Hannah, is it you?"

"Hunter?" Hannah wheezed, then she wailed with dismay and fainted.

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"It's not as bad as it looks."

"It feels bad."

"You were merely banged on the noggin. That kind of wound bleeds ferociously, so it always appears worse than it is."

Hunter was back at the manor, in Hannah's bedroom. She was snuggled on his lap, her arms curled tightly around his waist, as if she'd

never release him.

Rebecca had brought a pitcher of warm water and a pile of soft towels to clean her face. Hunter was gently swabbing away the dried blood. Behind them, housemaids and footmen were rushing in and out of the dressing room, filling a bathing tub, so she could soak her sore muscles and wash off the grime.

After she'd staggered in like a spectral apparition, Jackson had been so incensed that he'd whacked Winston with the poker, delivering several fierce blows before Warwick had dragged him off the cowering villain. Jackson had a potent lack of inhibition and an ingrained sense of justice that was terrifying.

Hunter needed to get the child into the army as soon as possible. It would be a good outlet for his rage, and it would also provide the training required to control it.

Hannah had fallen to the floor in an unconscious heap. She'd been in such a rough condition that he'd wondered if she hadn't dropped dead at his feet, but she hadn't. She was rattled and bruised, but bruises healed.

Warwick and Jackson were still at the Dower House, guarding Amelia and Winston. Hunter would join them the moment he could pry himself away.

"My head is aching," she said.

"I suspect it will hurt for quite awhile."

She peered up at him, and he kept his expression blank, not keen to have her observe his wrath, but he was so furious he could barely remain calm. She'd been through a horrendous ordeal, and she'd be distraught for ages.

On many occasions, he'd witnessed trauma in soldiers, and he'd suffered plenty of his own after he'd been wounded. It took an eternity to stop jumping at loud noises and blanching at sudden movement by others.

She'd have a slow recovery, and he wouldn't stir her unease by reminding her of how hazardous the situation had truly been. After she was better, they could dither over the details of the incident.

"I went over there to speak with him about the estate," she said.

"Hush. We don't have to discuss it now." He tried to settle her against his chest, but she was desperate to talk about what had occurred.

"He's always been rude and dismissive, but I never expected him to

become violent.”

“The last time I visited, he manhandled you. Remember?”

“Yes, but I never believed he’d actually hit me.”

“What did he use to pummel you?” There were two deep cuts on her scalp that he didn’t suppose had been inflicted by a fist. Webster had to have employed a weapon.

“It happened so fast; I couldn’t tell what it was. I assumed he was giving me some papers to read.”

“I’m delighted that you can recall portions of the event. It means the wallop wasn’t too forceful. Or it could be that you’re very hard-headed, so he couldn’t exact as much damage as he was hoping. It’s my view anyway.”

He offered the comment in jest, wanting to lighten the somber mood, but it didn’t work. Everyone was incredibly disturbed, the servants tiptoeing by, casting nervous glances at Hannah. They were alarmed by how she’d been assaulted and none of them had been present to prevent it.

“Why are you at Parkhurst?” she asked, as she rubbed her throbbing temple.

“I was in London, but I was worried about you. I mentioned my concern to your friend, Sybil Jones, and she nagged at me to check on you. Knowing your penchant for getting yourself into trouble, I decided I should listen to her.”

“Miss Jones was worried about me?”

“Yes.”

It wasn’t the real reason he’d come. The *real* reason was because he’d intended to propose again, but there was no hurry. She was a tad bewildered, would start a sentence, then lose her train of thought. Her befuddled state was scaring all of them.

“He tied me up,” she said. “Amelia assisted him and made certain the knots were extra tight.”

“I figured she probably had.”

“They carried me down to the wine cellar.” She scowled, struggling to recollect, and grimacing as if the effort was painful. “I went to sleep...I think. Then I woke up and I freed my wrists. It took forever.”

“You can tell me about it later,” he said, his tone soothing.

“He learned how to forge my signature. He was writing letters with



my name on them.”

“Don’t fret over it. He won’t ever have the chance to mail them.”

“He’s an arsonist! He set the fire that burned down my shop!”

Hunter was stunned. “He confessed to it?”

“Yes—for insurance money! I’m pretty sure he was going to kill me. Don’t you imagine that’s what he was planning?”

Hunter wasn’t about to have this conversation. Not while she was still so anxious. Not when she hadn’t even had an opportunity to scrape off the evidence.

“I’ll unravel his schemes. You shouldn’t fuss over it. You should just concentrate on feeling better.”

She began to cry quietly, and she collapsed onto his chest. He stroked a palm up and down her back and peeked over at Rebecca who appeared so stricken that Hunter was afraid she might faint.

*Will she be all right?* Rebecca mouthed.

He nodded and mouthed in reply, *She’ll be fine.*

A housemaid whispered, “Her bath is ready, Lord Marston.”

He drew Hannah up so she was looking at him, and he said, “Can you take a bath for me? Would you? The maids will clean you up and put you to bed. You’ll be more yourself after you’ve washed.”

“Yes, I can wash,” but she gaped about as if she didn’t know where she was.

“I’ll help you.”

“I can do it,” she insisted.

She slid to her feet, but she was swaying slightly, so he clasped her arm to steady her. He walked with her to the dressing room, pretending he was simply accompanying her, but mostly, he was propping her up so she didn’t fall down.

He wanted to sit with her as she bathed, wanted to keep an eye on her every second, but with her sister and the servants hovering, he didn’t dare.

“I’ll just be out in the hall,” he told her. “If you need anything, have Rebecca fetch me.”

“I shouldn’t need you,” she claimed, her voice tremulous, “but don’t leave!”

“I won’t leave. I promise.”

“And don’t let...*them* into the manor. I’d be very frightened if I had

to see them again. Can you swear they won't get in?"

"They will never be permitted back inside. I swear it to you. You relax, and *I* will handle everything else."

Rebecca stepped forward and led Hannah into the room. A trio of housemaids entered with them, and the door was closed. He dawdled until her bath was finished and she'd been tucked into bed. She drifted off so fast there had hardly been time to say goodnight.

"What should we do, Lord Marston?" a footman inquired as he tiptoed out of the bedchamber.

"I have to deal with Mr. and Mrs. Webster. Is this the only way in and out of this suite? There's no rear exit, is there?" The boy confirmed there wasn't, and Hunter said, "You can guard the door for me. Don't allow anyone in except her sister. If she awakens and asks for me, send someone to find me."

"She won't...won't die, will she?"

"Goodness, no. She'll have a headache, and she'll be jumpy and out of sorts for a few weeks, but she's a fighter. She'll recover quickly."

"What about Mr. and Mrs. Webster? What will happen to them?"

"I'll apprise you once I've determined the best conclusion."

Hunter marched out and proceeded to the Dower House. He didn't usually grow angry, and he never liked to quarrel. He wasn't a particularly vicious man, and he was never overly concerned about punishment or vengeance, but in this situation, the *usual* habits didn't apply.

Winston and Amelia Webster would have to pay a very high price for what they'd perpetrated, and Hunter was thrilled to be the person who would extract it from them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Stand up.”

“Why?”

Winston glared at Viscount Marston, but couldn't see him all that clearly. His left eye was swollen shut from the beating the boy had delivered with his accursed poker. Whatever Marston was contemplating, Winston didn't imagine the situation would end well.

He hadn't moved, and Marston said more sternly, “Stand up!”

Marston yanked Winston to his feet, but he'd been bruised and battered, so he hurt everywhere. He cried out with dismay. How many more indignities would he be required to suffer? He simply wished he could crawl into his bed and lie down.

While Marston had been over at the manor, Winston and Amelia had dawdled in the pathetic den at the Dower House. The boy and Marston's twin, the evil Warwick, had stood over them, fists at the ready, should they attempt to defend themselves or flee.

Their wrists were tightly bound, and they were huddled on the rug in an embarrassing posture. Amelia was weeping like a frightened child, and Winston would like to weep too, but he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of realizing he was afraid.

Night had fallen, and it was an ominous sign, the darkness especially threatening. It was drizzling rain, and the inclement weather would keep people hunkered down inside. If Marston perpetrated a transgression against Winston, who would be out and about to act as a witness?

Marston was dressed for traveling, and he said to the boy, “I have a carriage out front. Mr. Webster and Warwick are coming with me. I'll be gone for the rest of the evening.”

“I want to help you finish it,” the boy told him. “It's only fair that I be allowed to participate.”

“I need you to stay here and watch Mrs. Webster until I return. I'll deal with her then.”

With that, Marston started for the door, his grip tight on Winston's arm, and Winston tried to squirm away, but couldn't.

“What are you planning?” he asked rather frantically, but he was ignored.

Amelia had better luck. “Where are you taking him?”

“I’m not taking him anywhere,” Marston replied. “Haven’t you heard? He escaped our custody, and we have no idea where he went.”

Amelia frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“He vanished without a trace,” Marston bizarrely explained, “and he’s such a sly criminal that I’m positive he’ll never be found.”

Winston was even more confused than Amelia. Was Marston releasing him? Would he be permitted to sneak away unscathed? It didn’t seem likely.

“Amelia!” he called. “Stop him!”

“How would I, Winston?” She showed him the shackles on her wrists.

The boy said to Marston, “I’m tired of listening to them. May I gag her?”

“Yes, of course. Feel free.”

The boy walked to Amelia, kerchief in hand, to stuff it into her mouth. She refused to open for him, and he pinched her nose so she couldn’t breathe. When she finally gasped for air, the fiend accomplished his goal.

“Now see here!” Winston complained. “That’s my wife you’re abusing!”

Marston cut him off, saying to the boy, “Mr. Webster hit Hannah with a hard object. Have they mentioned what it was?”

“They haven’t talked about it, but it might have been this.”

He hurried to the desk and picked up the correct evidence. It was a broken piece of metal pipe Winston had tripped over in the woods. He’d been carrying it as a weapon in case the debt collectors accosted him. Marston lifted it, gauging its heavy weight.

He said to Winston, “You’re the type of coward who would hit a woman with a metal pipe. Is this it?” Winston smirked, and Marston said, “I’m assuming that’s a yes.”

Before he understood what Marston intended, the crazed lunatic struck Winston alongside the head with it. He collapsed, managing a last glimpse at Amelia as he fell to the floor.

When he awakened, he couldn’t figure out where he was. From how

he was bumping and jostling, he had to be in a carriage. His wrists were still tied behind his back, so he couldn't brace himself against the onslaught. He could only jolt and lurch with each rut in the road.

It was incredibly dark, and for a moment, he wondered if he'd been blinded, then he realized there was a sack over his head. He tried to shout for help, but he'd been gagged too.

After a lengthy trek where his misery grew too acute for words, the vehicle rattled to a halt. The sudden cessation of movement, coupled with the absolute silence, was terrifying. He lay very still, struggling to deduce where he was, but no clue presented itself.

After a torturous delay, the door was opened, and he was dragged out and onto his feet. He was off balance, feeling as if he might suffocate, and to his great shame, he was whimpering with alarm. What was about to happen?

The sack was yanked off, and though the night was black and rainy, there was enough light to see Marston and his twin. He appeared to be on a deserted, rural lane, in a deep thicket of woods. Marston marched him toward the trees, and Winston wrestled to prevent any forward progress, but Marston was such a big brute that resistance was impossible.

Eventually, they were spit out next to a wide river. Was it the Thames? Lamps were swinging on boats out in the current, so he guessed it had to be.

Marston pulled the kerchief from Winston's mouth, and Winston inhaled, hoping to scream for assistance, but Marston slid a knife out of his coat. He stuck the tip into the soft spot under Winston's chin, nicking Winston, drawing blood.

"Don't even think about it," Marston warned.

"Are you releasing me?" Winston asked.

Marston laughed in such an eerie way that Winston couldn't hold his bladder.

"Ah!" the twin said. "He's pissed himself."

"It doesn't matter." Marston focused his monstrous gaze on Winston. "My brother and I like to handle difficult problems on our own, and we never follow rules we don't like."

"You're speaking in riddles," Winston said. "Am I supposed to solve them?"

"I'm delighted to be clearer: I could take you to the authorities, but I've decided this situation needs a particular kind of justice. Tell me why you attacked Hannah."

"Bugger off," he muttered.

"Mind your manners—and your language."

"If I did anything to her, she deserved it. She's a flighty, impertinent female, while I am a male, and thus, her superior in every area that counts. She had no right to be so insolent toward me, and I tolerated her disregard for years."

The twin clucked his tongue with offense. "He's an idiot, isn't he?"

"I told you he was." To Winston, "Were you the arsonist who burned down her shop?"

"Maybe. You'll never prove it though."

Marston whacked him with the butt of the knife, hard enough that he saw stars. "I don't really care why you attacked her, but you should understand that you will never have another opportunity to inflict yourself on her."

"If you're planning to toss me into the river," Winston blustered, "I must inform you that I can't swim. And I especially can't when my wrists are bound."

"You don't have to know how to swim. Have you any last words?"

The question was voiced so nonchalantly that Winston wasn't certain what Marston meant. "Last *words* about what?"

"You're about to meet your Maker," Marston said. "Is there any comment you're dying to get off your chest?"

"What are you talking about?" Winston asked. "You're acting as if you're about to...to...kill me."

"I am about to do that."

Winston blanched. "This is England, and homicide is a capital crime. You can't just commit murder and expect to escape without consequence."

"Yes, I can. I am a decorated soldier of the Crown, a viscount who is son and heir to an earl. What are you? Who will miss you, Webster? Who will be concerned if you disappear? Is there anyone?"

Marston seemed to be deadly serious. What sort of deluded villain behaved so insanely? The entire episode was so bizarre that Winston couldn't convince himself it was actually occurring. It might have been

a dream.

"Check his pockets," Marston said to his twin. "Let's be sure there aren't any identifying items on his person."

The twin riffled in Winston's coat, removing a timepiece and an empty purse. Then he tugged off Winston's shoes and threw all of it into the bushes. Winston watched like a lump of clay, a man too battered and bewildered to fight back. He was swaying so violently that the twin stepped behind him to keep him upright.

"I love Hannah," Marston absurdly claimed, "and you shouldn't have hurt her. For that, you must pay a very high price."

"You told my wife you'd let me go." He wanted to sound forceful and tough, but he was wheezing, trembling, dizzy with terror.

"No, I told her people will assume you snuck away when I wasn't looking."

"But...but...you brought me here. There are witnesses."

"Are there?" Marston snickered and glanced at his twin. "Have you seen Winston Webster anywhere?"

"No," his twin said. "He crept out of the Dower House, and I can't imagine where he is."

"I'm happy to vanish," Winston said. "I won't argue about it."

Marston pretended to ponder Winston's suggestion, then he smirked. "If you were skulking out there in the world, I would always have to wonder if you might return and harm Hannah again. That's a burden I won't accept."

"I'll *vanish*," Winston repeated. "I swear."

"Yes, you'll vanish. In that, you and I are in complete agreement. I could allow you to be tried and hanged," Marston mused, "but then, the sordid story would be in the newspapers. Hannah's name would be dragged through the mud with yours. You've imposed yourself on her for far too long, and your harassment is ending. This is a good night for endings, don't you think?"

"I'm willing to take my chances in the courts. Any judge in the land would recognize how she constantly defied me. No man should have had to suffer as I did. If she and I had differences, and if I attempted to rein in her impudent tendencies, it's her own fault."

The twin spoke to his brother. "Must we listen to this drivel?"

"No," Marston replied. "I've heard more than enough."

“Be careful you don’t get blood on your boots,” the twin said.

Before Winston could inquire as to what he meant, Marston lowered the knife and stabbed it into Winston’s belly. The pain was quick and sharp—and curiously unreal.

“Your bloated corpse will be found floating in the river,” Marston said, “but there are hundreds of bodies found in the river every year. No one will know who you are, and you’ll be dumped in a pauper’s grave, without even a marker to indicate the spot. For a pompous beast like you, that’s the best conclusion I can devise on the spur of the moment.”

Winston was gasping, trying to wiggle free of the knife, but to no avail. Marston pulled the blade upwards, then drew it out, as the twin released Winston. He collapsed to the ground in an odd sort of slowed motion, his mind disconnected from events. Then he was flying through the air. He smacked into the cold water, face down, and he sank swiftly.

*Amelia!* he thought, a flicker of memory jolting him with how she’d been so devoted, but then, even that spark was extinguished and everything went black.

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Nate’s carriage rolled to a halt, and he peeked out the window, searching the dark lane for Rebecca. He didn’t see her, but he had no doubt she’d arrive shortly.

He was so excited he could barely contain his glee. The prior day, he’d received a letter from her. Apparently, a familial catastrophe had occurred, and it had coaxed her mother from home.

She’d written at once to apprise him that he should come to Parkhurst to fetch her away. He hadn’t even had to wait until the following Saturday to abscond with her. She was eager to go immediately, before her mother returned.

Finally, his luck was changing.

He opened the door himself and jumped out. He was traveling incognito, using his own vehicle, one he’d hidden from creditors so they hadn’t repossessed it, but he hadn’t brought any of his servants. In case the situation didn’t unfold as he was planning, he couldn’t have gossip circulating.

Instead, he’d hired a pair of grooms—unsavory types—from a coaching inn in London, and he’d provided them with a fake name. If he



ever crossed paths with them in town, he'd simply pretend he had no idea who they were.

He checked his timepiece, and it was midnight, as he and Rebecca had arranged. The gate to Parkhurst was just ahead. There was plenty of moon to illuminate it, and Rebecca wasn't standing under it as she was supposed to be.

"Give me a minute," he murmured to his driver. "We should be on the road very soon."

He'd debated whether to inform them of the genuine purpose of the trip, but with them whisking him to Scotland, he couldn't exactly conceal what he was doing. He'd told them a whopping lie about how they'd be rescuing an innocent Miss who'd been badly abused by her father.

It should have won them to his cause, but they were criminals who weren't impressed that he was eloping. So long as they were paid at the end, they'd be happy. The jury was still out as to any payment though. Nate was always broke, and if he could sneak away from them and avoid compensation, he would.

He went over and stood at the estate entrance. His nerves were rattled, his anxiety spiraling. He'd plotted so meticulously, but there were so many ways he could be thwarted. If she didn't show up, how would he proceed?

Footsteps sounded, and he peered down the lane. To his enormous consternation, Hunter and Jackson Graves emerged from the shadows, and the sight of them was so strange that he couldn't deduce what he was witnessing.

Why would Hunter be at Parkhurst? Why would he be strolling about at the precise moment Rebecca was scheduled to appear? Hunter had warned Nate to leave Rebecca alone, and his bowels clenched. What if she strutted up right then? How would Nate explain it?

"Hello, Nate," Hunter said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Hunter!" He forced joviality into his tone. "Why on earth are you at Parkhurst?"

"I could ask you the same."

Nate replied with, "You're the very last person I was expecting to bump into."

"Yes, I'm sure I was." He added the very worst words Nate had ever

heard. "Rebecca isn't coming."

Nate scoffed as if the notion was preposterous. "Who isn't coming? Rebecca Graves? Is that who you mean? I scarcely know the girl. I was ah...ah..."

He couldn't devise a good story, and while he was dithering and wondering if he could run to his carriage and race away, Jackson strolled up and hit Nate just as hard as he could. It was a furious punch and a complete surprise.

Nate staggered back and muttered, "What the hell was that for?"

"That was for my sister," Jackson said. "If you ever bother her again, I'll kill you."

He might have delivered another blow, but Hunter stopped him, so Nate lowered his guard. Then Hunter hit him too.

The wallop was so powerful that Nate was lifted off the ground, and he collapsed in a stunned heap. He lay in the dirt, half-conscious, blood oozing from his nose and mouth. He wanted to leap up and claim he'd had no plans with regard to her, that he'd merely been passing by in the neighborhood.

Would that work? He was so disoriented that he couldn't decide.

He struggled to focus, as Hunter leaned down and seized him by his coat. He drew Nate in very close, so Nate couldn't miss how angry he was.

"Rebecca is little more than a child," Hunter said. "What is wrong with you?"

"Don't you dare lecture me. You're rich and very grand. You have no idea what it's like to be poor."

"No, I don't, but somehow, even if I didn't have a penny to my name, I'm certain I would never inflict myself on a child."

Hunter released his grip, so Nate collapsed down again. Nate should have remained silent, but he couldn't resist digging more of a hole for himself. "She was excited to elope with me. Her mother is a lunatic, and she begged me to help her escape."

"Only a brute as deluded as you would believe that." Hunter kicked him in the ribs. "I'm through with you. Don't ever contact me. Don't ever so much as look at me. If you see me on the street, walk in the other direction, for I can guarantee if you ever step into my path, I will beat you bloody all over again."

Hunter punched him a final time, just for sport it seemed, and Nate was so discombobulated that he couldn't defend himself. Hunter and the boy dragged him to the coach and tossed him inside.

"I want him back in London as fast as you can get him there," Hunter said to the driver. "Don't slow down for any reason, and don't let me catch you sniffing around here ever again. If I do, there will have to be consequences."

The two grooms didn't have to be told twice. With a crack of the whip, the horses bolted away.

Nate was huddled on the floor and too bewildered to sit up. As they bumped down the rutted road, he bounced painfully and grabbed for purchase to pull himself up onto the seat, but he couldn't find his balance.

Ultimately, he curled into a ball and tried to cushion his body against the rough pounding, and he could barely feel the jabs and bangs. He could simply think about Rebecca's pretty money, how it would stay locked in a safe vault, how it would never flow into his empty purse.

On top of it all, he'd squandered his friendship with Hunter. It was a night of horrors, a night of ruin, and he shut his eyes and cried like a baby.

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"This will be a trial of sorts, and you two will be my jurors."

Hunter stared at Rebecca and Jackson, and Jackson said, "Shouldn't Hannah participate too?"

"No," Hunter said. "Your sister shouldn't have to contemplate Amelia Webster."

"May I offer a comment?" Mrs. Webster asked.

"No, you may not"—Hunter didn't so much as glance at her—"and if you interrupt me again, I will have you gagged for the rest of the proceedings."

They were in the Dower House, in the den where Winston Webster had attacked Hannah. Hunter was seated at the desk, Warwick standing behind him, with Jackson and Rebecca in the chairs across. Amelia Webster was lashed to a chair that had been shoved into the corner.

"Where is my husband?" she asked even though he'd warned her to be silent.

Hunter turned to her, his expression pure innocence. “How would I know his whereabouts? He snuck away while I was sleeping.”

“You liar! You and your brother left with him, and he never came back.”

Hunter peeked over his shoulder at Warwick. “Did you and I leave Parkhurst with Mr. Webster?”

“Gad, no,” Warwick replied. “I spent the night snuggled in bed in the manor. I have no clue where he is. Is she daft in the head?”

“Yes,” Hunter answered. “There have always been stories that she’s a bit mad. Clearly, she can’t tell truth from fiction, so she must be having a mental breakdown.”

Mrs. Webster started to wail and complain, and Hunter said to Warwick, “Take her down to the wine cellar. Tie her to a post—the same one where they tied Hannah—and we’ll deal with her shortly, after we have a verdict.”

Hunter waited while Warwick hauled her out. Once it was quiet again, he looked at Rebecca. “We have to determine what’s to be done with her, and it’s up to you.”

Rebecca blanched. “Why would it be up to me? I’m not the person to decide such an important issue.”

“Well, I have my view of what should happen to your mother, but I’m afraid it would be a much harsher conclusion than you would like to have implemented.”

“What are my choices?”

Hunter counted the options on his fingers. “She can be placed in a nunnery forever. There’s one in Scotland we could pay to admit her. Or we could have her committed to an insane asylum, but those facilities are violent and disgusting. Or she can be arrested and imprisoned. We could request that she be transported to the penal colonies, but then, the scandal might wind up in the newspapers.”

“I wouldn’t like that,” Rebecca said.

“Or *I* could book passage for her on a ship and send her out of the country on my own. We wouldn’t have to bother with a trial and all the rest.”

Rebecca asked Jackson, “Which of those would be best?”

“I wouldn’t like the situation to be reported in the newspapers. I’d just like her to depart and never return, and I’m not particularly

concerned over how it's accomplished."

"No matter what we select," Hunter said to Jackson, "she would never be allowed to return to Parkhurst. It's why I need to hear what Rebecca wants. I hope she and I will be friends far into the future, and I would hate to have her upset with me later on."

"If we had Mrs. Webster arrested," Jackson said, "might Rebecca have to testify against her mother?"

"Yes, and Hannah would too. And it might drag on for ages, so they'd have to fret and worry. It would be very public and very lurid."

Jackson pondered for a minute. "If that's the case, then it should probably be either the convent or the ship out of the country. What do you think, Rebecca? Does that sound all right?"

"Mother is awful at taking care of herself. If Lord Marston put her on a ship, how would she survive in a foreign land?"

"She might not," Hunter said, "so maybe it should be the convent."

Rebecca and Jackson stared at each other, then Rebecca nodded. "Yes, the convent would be fine—so long as she's gone for good."

"They'll never let her out," Hunter said. "I can promise you that."

"When will you leave with her?" Jackson asked.

"In a few days. I have to make the travel arrangements first."

"May I accompany you?"

"No. You have to watch over your sisters for me."

"I will, but what if Mrs. Webster doesn't agree to what we've picked?"

Hunter scoffed. "She doesn't get to have an opinion."

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Hannah glanced up, delighted to see Hunter approaching. She was sitting in Rebecca's solarium, and she loved the quiet spot. There were flowers everywhere, and the air was fresh, the sun shining on the glass, raising the temperature to a balmy level.

Since her ordeal had ended, she was ridiculously weepy and emotional. She jumped at the slightest noises, and her heart would pound for no reason. Her anxiety would spiral, and she'd feel as if she couldn't breathe.

In the solarium, she could rest, read, and think about what she'd like to have happen next. Unfortunately, the future was now a nebulous

concept, and any planning was beyond her.

Hunter had become a rock upon which she was leaning. While she'd slept and healed, he'd dealt with Winston, Amelia, and Nate Carew so she wouldn't have to. He'd assumed control of the property, had reviewed the staff and the ledgers. He was bringing some of his servants from Marston to stabilize her affairs, to get her back on a sounder footing in ways she could never have managed herself.

He'd been wonderful about it. Not pompous. Not overbearing. He'd simply leapt into action. Occasionally, she'd observe him at breakfast or supper or, in the middle of the day, riding about the estate, with his brother or Jackson glued to his side. When she crossed his path, he'd be polite and chatty, always asking about her condition and how her recuperation was proceeding.

He was treating her as if they were fond cousins, and his behavior was extremely confusing. He hadn't been flirtatious or charming. He hadn't mentioned her sojourn at Marston Manor or that they'd once been a few hours away from eloping. He hadn't mentioned the fact that he'd ruined her.

He was carrying on as if the entire debacle had never occurred.

She figured she should still be very angry with him, but her fury had floated away the minute he'd arrived at Parkhurst—just when she'd needed him the most. She felt so safe with him around. She felt protected and even a bit cherished.

What was he feeling?

She wouldn't try to guess. The man was a mystery and always had been.

He smiled and waved. She waved too, and she studied him as he walked through the door. It dawned on her that he was dressed for traveling.

"Don't get up," he said. "You look much too comfortable."

"I'm being lazy."

"You're allowed."

"Are you leaving?" As she asked the question, her pulse raced with fear, which was so exasperating.

She wasn't a baby, and she had to stop quailing with terror at the drop of a hat. He was an adult male with a full life in town. She didn't require a nanny, and he'd set plenty of changes in motion that would

vastly improve Parkhurst.

*She* merely had to grow stronger, so she could seize the reins and take charge. At the moment though, she liked loafing and not thinking about much.

“Yes, I’m leaving,” he said, “but only for a short interval. Maybe two weeks? Maybe three? I’m transporting Mrs. Webster to the convent in Scotland.”

“Oh.”

She never contemplated Amelia if she didn’t have to, and she had no opinion about the conclusion he’d arranged with Rebecca. So long as Amelia was removed from Parkhurst, Hannah was fine with whatever decision was implemented.

“Once I’m finished,” he said, “I’ll be back. I have a lot of chores though, so if I’m delayed, don’t be concerned.” He laid a palm on her shoulder. “You can’t be afraid simply because I’m gone.”

“I won’t be afraid.”

“I have to rid us of your stepmother, then I have to handle a lengthy list of tasks in London that are dreary and complicated. You’ll be all right while I’m away.”

“Of course I will be.”

“Jackson will watch over you, and you couldn’t have a better sentinel—except for me.”

“What if...if...”

She couldn’t complete the sentence. She wanted to inquire about Winston, but it was her specific intent to never speak his name ever again.

Hunter understood her predicament. “Don’t worry about him. He won’t bother you in the future.”

“Not ever?”

“Not ever. I swear it to you.”

Hunter stared at her for an eternity. It was a silent communication that contained a thousand messages he would never voice aloud. He seemed to be telling her Winston would never come back because he *couldn’t* come back.

She wasn’t certain what had happened to him. She’d heard whispers that he’d escaped his fetters in the night and had run away, but she couldn’t imagine Hunter permitting that to transpire.

She suspected he'd perpetrated a violent act against Winston, and she probably ought to be upset about the possibility, but she wasn't. Apparently, she had bloodthirsty tendencies, and if Winston had met with a bad end, she wouldn't complain.

"Promise me you won't overdo when I'm not around to scold you," he said.

"You needn't fret. I shall lounge in the sun and accomplish little else."

"I'll hurry."

"You don't have to hurry, not on my account."

"Don't rush your recovery. You'll make progress, but slowly. It's difficult to heal from a situation like this. I learned that after I was wounded in the army."

"I have much more patience than you, so I won't become frustrated."

He grinned his devil's grin. "When I return, I'll have a surprise for you."

"I hate surprises."

She'd sounded terribly churlish, and he clucked his tongue with mock aggravation. "What kind of ninny hates surprises?"

"Well, I don't *hate* them precisely, but please don't embarrass me."

"Me? Embarrass you? You're mad if you suppose I would."

His hand was still on her shoulder, and she laid hers over the top of his, the gesture rocking them, bonding them.

"Thank you," she said. "For your assistance? You've been a true blessing to me."

"I've been a blessing? My goodness, Hannah, I think that knock on the head has left you silly."

He bent down, and her breath hitched, as she thought he would kiss her. And he did, but on the cheek, once again pretending they were fond cousins.

Then he straightened and walked out.

She watched him until he disappeared from view, and she was wretched over his departure, was alarmed over it, was bereft over it. She nearly leapt up to chase after him, to pull him to a halt, to tell him he should never go away. Not ever! Not for a single second for the rest of her life.



But that would be deranged behavior, and she had to calm down. He'd just be away for a bit, then he'd return. She was positive he would.

She tipped her face up to the sun and let the warm rays work their magic.

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"I don't agree to this."

"It's not up to you."

Amelia glared at Viscount Marston, her loathing flowing out and over him, but he simply gazed at her with a bland expression, her animosity bouncing off him. Men had always been stronger and more powerful than she was. Her relationship with him was no exception.

Without warning, he'd blithely announced she was being locked away in a convent. According to him, her daughter had arranged it, and Amelia hadn't been consulted or heeded. After several days on the road, where she'd been bound, gagged, and transported against her will, she was at the end of the line.

"I demand to speak with my husband," she said.

"No one knows where he is."

"*You* know," she fumed.

"I have no idea why you'd assume that. When he slithered away, why didn't he take you with him? Aren't you curious about that? It seems to me that he's deserted you."

"Winston wouldn't abandon me," she said with much more confidence than she felt. How frequently had she wondered if he'd leave her?

The instant the question arose, she shoved it away.

Lord Marston was confusing her, was tricking her. He'd whisked Winston out of the Dower House, and he'd come back alone. She didn't care how often he claimed otherwise, she wasn't wrong about what she'd witnessed.

She was seated in his carriage, and he was standing outside. Behind him, she could see the stone walls of the convent, the barred, heavy gate. No woman whose fees were paid was ever released. It was a life sentence.

He'd already conferred with the Mother Superior, and their discussion had dragged on forever. But their conversation was over, and

he believed Amelia was staying—even though she'd vehemently insisted she wouldn't.

"I want to talk to Hannah or...or...even Rebecca," she said.

While they'd still been at Parkhurst, he'd kept her imprisoned in the wine cellar. She'd begged to speak to Hannah, but he'd refused her requests. Amelia was certain—if she and Hannah could have chatted—the whole debacle would have blown over.

After all, what had really happened? Hannah had quarreled with Winston. He'd lost his temper and had given her a little tap on the head, but she was fine! It wasn't as if she'd suffered any genuine injury, and Amelia couldn't understand what all the fuss was about.

Marston had quashed any meeting with Rebecca too. Amelia had intended to order Rebecca to go to the authorities, to file a report over Winston's disappearance, to tell people Lord Marston had harmed Winston somehow, but supposedly, Rebecca wasn't interested in how Amelia was faring.

Her own daughter! Being awful to her mother! It was such an outrage, and with Rebecca snubbing her, and Winston having vanished, who was there to be an ally?

"I didn't do anything to Hannah," she said.

"You tied her up and hauled her down into the cellar. Did you think she was dead when you dumped her down there? Were you waiting for night to fall so you could bury her after dark? Or were you planning to *kill* her after it was dark and then bury her?"

Amelia's cheeks heated, and she didn't respond. She still didn't comprehend why she hadn't intervened to stop Winston. The event had played out like a strange dream from which she couldn't awaken.

"Hannah wouldn't like you to be so cruel to me," she said. "If she was aware of how you've been treating me, she'd be very upset."

Lord Marston snickered. "Hannah asked me to bring you here. Rebecca too. They both felt it was the best way to be protected from you."

It was the harshest comment he could have uttered. "I should have a lawyer! I wish to plead my case to a judge, and he'll listen. There must be someone who could save me from your wicked machinations."

"If you had a trial, Mrs. Webster, you would be hanged after your conviction. Would you rather have an execution as your conclusion?"

He grinned evilly. "That's what I would have preferred, but your daughter and stepdaughter were worried about your sorry hide."

"I need to talk to my husband!"

"And I repeat: I don't know where he is. Now, I'm tired of your dithering. Are you climbing out or not?"

"I'm not!"

She pressed into the seat as if she were a spoiled toddler, so he reached in and lifted her out. There was a door next to the gate, and he escorted her over to it. He knocked briskly, and it was opened by a nun. The woman didn't greet her, but she studied Amelia as if she was a peculiar problem that had to be solved.

"This is Mrs. Webster," Lord Marston said. "Good luck with her. She's quite mad, so I hope you can manage her without too much trouble."

"I'm not mad!" Amelia roared like a lunatic, but they ignored her.

The nun motioned for Amelia to enter, but Amelia didn't move. She had a brief second to imagine jerking away and running for freedom, but she was prevented from fleeing when he shoved her inside.

"I curse the day I welcomed you into my family," she said to him, then the nun shut the door before she could add any other insults.

The last glimpse she had of the outside world was his smirking, smug face.

"He murdered my husband," she told the nun. "Can you contact the authorities for me?"

"Lord Marston explained that you've grown deluded in your thought processes, so the peace and quiet here will be very beneficial for you."

The nun walked down a path toward the grim, grey buildings of the compound, and clearly, she expected Amelia to follow. Amelia spun to the door, and she screamed, cried, and hammered on it. She wailed at Lord Marston for his duplicity, wailed at Hannah and Rebecca for their betrayal, wailed at Winston for abandoning her.

She kept on and on until her hands were bloody and her throat raw, and she was so exhausted she couldn't continue. She collapsed to the ground, a limp, confused rag of fatigue.

As she huddled in the dirt, a group of nuns scurried over, picked her up, and carried her away. She was too stunned to fight them.

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Isabella headed to the house that had been her home for the prior year. It was centrally located, near her favorite shops and parks.

She shouldn't be so attached to it, and it was time to leave, but she couldn't force herself to make any preparations. From the minute Hunter had inherited his title, she'd clung to a thrilling fantasy where she'd become his bride. She'd be Mrs. Hunter Stone, Viscountess Marston, and eventually, Countess Swindon.

She'd let the vision blossom to the point where she truly believed it could occur, but he'd been so angry about her trip to Marston. She'd been tossed in a carriage and sent away in disgrace. She hadn't seen him since, so she hadn't been able to beg his pardon.

Where was he? Why couldn't she find him? What if he'd eloped with Miss Graves? What if he returned to London as a married man? The notion left her dizzy with offense.

She slipped into the foyer and was taking off her bonnet when a housemaid rushed up. She was a girl Isabella had hired herself out of the pin money Hunter gave her. The other servants were *his* servants, but she'd needed one of her own who would be loyal to her rather than him.

"Miss Darling!" the girl murmured. "Viscount Marston is here!"

Isabella gasped. He'd arrived when she was out! What dastardly luck!

"How long has he been waiting?"

"Almost an hour."

She patted her hair and clothes and frantically asked, "How do I look?"

"It doesn't matter how you look," the girl bizarrely said, "but may I come with you?"

It was a strange question, and Isabella frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You told me we were staying past the deadline, so I haven't applied for any other positions. With this one over, I'm not certain what will happen to me."

Isabella couldn't listen to complaints about any future employment, and she pushed by her and hurried up to her boudoir. Hunter was standing in the middle of the room, and several burly footmen from his

town house were present. There were crates and traveling trunks stacked everywhere, and it appeared her belongings had been swiftly and haphazardly packed.

“Isabella, there you are,” he curtly said, as if they’d had an appointment, and she was late.

“What’s going on?”

“Let’s discuss it in the front parlor.”

“Tell me what this is about. I insist.”

He said to the servants, “Finish up while I’m downstairs.”

He clasped her arm and marched her out, and he had to practically drag her. She wasn’t exactly trying to slow their pace, but she was disoriented and perplexed. Was she being evicted? Would her things be put out on the street? The prospect was too infuriating to consider.

They entered the parlor, and before she had an opportunity to protest his horrid treatment, he said, “I’ve determined that you breached our contract.”

“What? I never have!”

“You knew better than to show up at Marston unannounced.”

“It was Nate’s fault. Not mine. He claimed you’d be lonely and would like to have some company.”

She smiled, anxious to coax a responding smile out of him, but he glowered as if she were a misbehaved toddler.

“I don’t care why you were there,” he said. “Your conduct was extremely detrimental to me.”

“Why is that?” She was sneering, but she couldn’t help it. She was just so enraged! “Was Miss Graves upset? Why should we fret over her? She’s nothing to us.”

A dangerous look clouded his gaze. Clearly, she should keep Miss Graves out of the conversation, but the annoying tart was the cause of what was wrong. How could Isabella forget that fact?

“You’re too sure of your spot by my side,” he said.

“We’re so good together, Hunter. Your happiness is always my first concern.”

“No, *your* happiness is what drives you, and you have totally misconstrued your role in my life.”

“I’m sorry for visiting Marston. I shouldn’t have.”

“Fine, I’m delighted to hear you’re sorry, but we’re through.”

Her knees buckled, and she had to grab onto the sofa to steady herself. "But you promised to extend our contract!"

"No, I didn't."

"Shall I apologize again? Is that what you want? You're glaring at me as if you hate me."

"I don't hate you. I'm simply done with you."

As he voiced the comment, he was so blasé that they could have been discussing the weather. How could he be so cold? So detached? She felt as if she was dying.

"Are you kicking me out?" she asked.

"Yes," he brutally said.

"Where am I to go?"

"I've rented lodging for you for the next month. The servants know where it's located. There's a wagon coming to cart your trunks over to it."

"I don't agree to this!"

"It's not up to you," he crushed her by replying. "You can ride in the wagon or you can hire a cab. It's your choice."

"If I travel anywhere, it will be in my own carriage."

"Well, that's a problem for you because it's *my* carriage, and you no longer have use of it."

There was a satchel over on a table, and he picked it up and handed it to her. She didn't reach for it, but sidled away, as if it were a venomous snake.

"What's in it?" she demanded.

"I don't view myself as a cruel man, so I will supply you with a year's severance. There's one condition though."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"You have to depart England for a year. Paris is beautiful. Or you could try Scotland, but I've found the winters there to be frigid and uncomfortable."

She scoffed. "I'm not about to go to Paris or Scotland."

"Your obsession with me has to cool down, and if we're constantly bumping into each other, it never will. I'm positive time and distance will repair the situation."

"You're awfully certain I'll oblige you. Why are you being so horrid?"

"I'm getting married."

If he'd pulled out a knife and stabbed her, he couldn't have wounded her any more painfully. "You're what?"

"I'm marrying, and I can't have you popping up every second to irritate me."

"Who is your bride to be?"

"Who would you suppose? It's Miss Graves."

"Oh, Hunter, please! It will kill me if you wed her!"

"My decision has no bearing on my relationship with you whatsoever."

"How can you say that? You should be marrying me! I...I...love you. I thought we'd always be together."

He rolled his eyes. "You've never loved anyone but yourself, and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't create a scene." He waved the satchel at her. "Will you take the severance and leave England or not?"

"No! You can choke on your blood money!"

She'd hoped her vehement rejection would affect him, but he was unmoved. "If you won't depart, I won't give you anything. I won't even pay for the month's rent at the lodging I'm willing to provide. I'll toss you out on the street, and you can fend for yourself."

"This is blackmail!"

"Yes."

"Bastard..." she mumbled.

He stared at her forever, wearing her down with the force of his personality.

Her mind whirled as she hastily reviewed her options. She yearned to refuse what he was offering, but she couldn't imagine it. During her time with him, she'd skimmed from the household account he'd furnished for her expenses, but London was very costly so the sum wouldn't last long.

If she didn't agree, what would become of her?

"I can see you're deviously plotting," he said. "You're wondering if you can trick me by accepting the money, but not retiring to France. You're debating whether you can lurk in London on the fringe of my world, and that my pique will gradually fade so it won't aggravate me. You shouldn't presume that would be possible. If you attempt it, I guarantee every door in the demimonde will be closed to you."

“And if I go as you’re demanding? What then?”

“Then...? Nothing. I’m sure this period apart will fix the issue, and I won’t ever speak a bad word about you, so you’ll be able to find a new gentleman. But if you harass me, if you pester my wife, if you renege on our bargain, then all bets will be off, and I will spread any story I feel like telling.”

If she’d been clutching a pistol, she’d have shot him right in the middle of his cold, black heart.

He knew her so well! She’d been furtively thinking she’d grab the money, then skulk in London and gossip about him and his pasty-faced wife. If she told lies about him, they’d bounce off him like dull arrows. Yet if he told lies about *her*, her social standing would collapse, and she’d be in real trouble.

It wasn’t fair that he was rich and male. Men were so powerful, and they always held all the cards. She had to abide by his terms or be ruined. What kind of choice was that?

“Fine,” she spat, “I’ll take the severance and travel to Paris.”

“A wise decision.”

She yanked the satchel away from him, and she didn’t bother peeking in it. It would contain another contract or perhaps a bank draft she would have to figure out how to cash. A *man* would have to handle it for her. She, as a woman, wouldn’t be allowed to do it herself.

“What are your plans for my house?” she said. “I suppose you’ll finish your mistress interviews and give it to my replacement.”

“Actually, I’m selling it. I intend to fall madly in love with my bride, so in the future, I won’t need any doxies.”

He seized her arm and marched her toward the front door. Another brawny footman was dawdling by it, and as they approached, he jerked it open. Hunter continued on outside, and though she struggled to slow him down, to glance over her shoulder for a last glimpse of the foyer, she couldn’t manage one.

A wagon had pulled up, and her belongings were being loaded. Hunter escorted her to it and said, “Goodbye, Isabella. Godspeed. I’m certain you’ll have a marvelous holiday in France.”

He strolled off, and she sputtered, “That’s it? You’re going?”

“Yes, I’m going.”

He was so delighted to be shed of her that he was practically



skipping with joy. His carriage was down the block, and before she could muster the energy to chase after him, he climbed into it. His outriders jumped aboard, his driver cracked the whip, and he was whisked away. Just that fast.

“Hunter!” she shouted like a deranged lunatic, but the entreaty was pointless.

Passersby frowned and glared, and the nearby servants gaped at her with an enormous amount of pity. Her cheeks heated with chagrin. She inhaled a deep, fortifying breath, then walked over to the front door. She spun the knob, determined to supervise the rest of the packing, but she was stunned to find it locked.

She knocked quite loudly, and the brawny footman peered out.

“May I help you?” he asked.

“My trunks are still being brought out. I shouldn’t have to cool my heels out here on the street while they are.”

“Sorry, Miss Darling, but you’re not to be permitted back inside.” He nodded to the wagon. “Why don’t you sit in the box? We’ll be departing in a few minutes.”

“I don’t want to sit in the box. I want to sit in my own bloody parlor.”

“I have my orders.”

With that, he shut the door in her face.

She stood like an idiot, listening as the key grated in the lock. She glowered at it stupidly, not able to process what she was witnessing.

It seemed as if she was trapped in a nightmare, and she couldn’t wake up. If she’d been a weepy sort of female, she’d have dropped to the ground and cried like a baby.

As it was, she could only shake her fist at the heavens and murmur over and over that she hated Hunter Stone with an abiding passion, and she would never forgive him as long as she lived.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“We have to tell you something important.”

“What is it?”

Hannah stared at Rebecca and Jackson. They appeared impish and smug, as if they knew a secret she didn’t. The pair had bonded so powerfully, and it would remain the great joy of her life that Jackson had joined the family and that she and Rebecca had a very nice, very loyal brother to call their own.

“We’ve talked about it repeatedly,” Rebecca said, “so you shouldn’t suppose we haven’t thought it through. I especially can’t have you assuming *I* haven’t pondered enough.”

Hannah frowned. “You both look so serious that you’re scaring me.”

“It’s not scary,” Jackson claimed. “It’s just a possibility.”

“Which is...?”

Rebecca provided the answer. “I’m giving Jackson my half of Parkhurst.”

“I didn’t suggest it,” he hurried to insist, as if Hannah had accused him of coercing her.

“It was my idea,” Rebecca said. “I want him to have it.”

Hannah asked Rebecca, “Is this because of...well...of the rumor about your parentage?” She wouldn’t speak Winston Webster’s name aloud, and they understood she wouldn’t. “You shouldn’t necessarily believe it. It’s entirely likely that the story was a lie.”

“I don’t think it was a lie, and it means Sir Edmund isn’t my father. But it’s established fact that he was Jackson’s father. It’s only fair that the property belongs to him.”

Hannah wouldn’t argue about Rebecca’s paternity. With Winston bragging that he’d sired her, it was clearer than ever that Rebecca resembled him exactly and didn’t resemble Hannah and Jackson at all.

“What is your opinion?” Hannah asked Jackson.

They were in the front parlor at Parkhurst. Hannah was seated on a sofa by the hearth. It was a chilly afternoon, the sky grey and promising rain, and they had a fire burning to warm the room. Rebecca was pacing,

as she explained to Hannah what she hoped to do. Jackson was over by the window, peering outside, as if he was watching for guests to arrive.

"I'm happy with whatever Rebecca chooses," Jackson said in reply to Hannah's query.

"He'll let me start a school," Rebecca added. "That's my plan. I liked attending boarding school so much, and I'd like other girls to have the same chance."

"It's a good dream to have," Hannah told her, "but it would cost money. I can't imagine how we'll ever have an amount sufficient for an enterprise like that."

"Things will get better fast now that you're in charge, and Viscount Marston's people are improving matters quickly. They're experts at running an estate. We'll be on the right track in no time."

"Lord Marston's servants have been very helpful," Hannah agreed, "but they won't be here forever, and we can't count on them to fix our financial woes."

"You just can't predict what might happen." Jackson stared out the window even more intently. "I wouldn't be surprised if his servants end up staying for quite awhile."

In Hannah's view, they'd already dawdled too long, and she constantly expected to hear from Hunter that they had to come home and resume their regular duties at Marston.

She was growing stronger and more competent by the day, so if they left, she'd be fine. Yet it was lovely to have them on the premises, to have them mending what was broken and modifying what needed to be altered. So far, she'd trusted all of their assessments, and their dedicated support had been a boon too wonderful to describe.

They made her seem closer to Hunter, which was probably deranged.

As he'd departed Parkhurst, he'd claimed he would return in two weeks, but it had been over a month with no sign of him. She was aware of the sort of life he led in town, and it was very likely he'd realized it was much more entertaining to cavort in the city than to loaf with her in the country.

She ought to be glad he'd avoided her, to be glad he wasn't underfoot and bothering her. When he was present, she couldn't forget how fervidly she'd once yearned to be his bride. She had to tamp down

that memory and move on, but it was so hard.

After her ordeal at the Dower House, where he'd shown up like a knight on a white charger, they'd been linked in a way that couldn't be severed. From the minute he'd ridden away to convey Amelia to Scotland, she been ridiculously fearful. There was no one at the estate who might frighten or harass her, so there was no reason to fret, but she could still be so apprehensive.

If he was with her, she was certain she'd always feel calm and protected.

He was front and center in all her musings, so it was difficult to focus on any other topic. She physically yanked herself out of her dreamy reverie to concentrate on the current issue, that being Jackson and Rebecca and their scheme for Jackson to own half of Parkhurst.

"I'm not sure I should have an opinion about this," she said. "Nor am I convinced that any of it should be up to me, but Rebecca, are you positive? I only inquire because—if we change the title—it will be permanent. It will be forever."

"I understand," Rebecca said, but Hannah doubted her sister comprehended the particulars.

"Later on," Hannah continued to press, "if you met a nice boy and decided you'd like to wed him, you wouldn't have Parkhurst as a lure to snag him."

Rebecca blanched with dismay. "I won't ever marry. A husband would take me away from home, and I wouldn't like that."

"I would hate to have it stir a problem between you and Jackson. If you give it to him, you'll never persuade him to give it back."

Jackson huffed with offense. "I'd give it back—if she asked for it. I would never keep it from her."

"You say that now," Hannah gently apprised him, "but you're both so young. In another decade, Rebecca might wish she hadn't proceeded."

"I won't ever wish that." Rebecca sounded very firm. "Could you write to Attorney Thumberton for me and inform him of what I'd like to do?"

"Yes, I can write to him, but he'll try to talk you out of it."

Rebecca grinned. "He'll never succeed. I'm determined to sign it over to Jackson."

“And I’m determined,” Jackson said, “to always watch over her.”

His attention was on the lane, and he peeked at Rebecca and nodded.

“Is it them?” Rebecca asked.

“Yes.” Jackson spun away from the window and said to Hannah, “We have company. Shall we go out to meet them?”

“Who is it? From how you’re smirking, I’m almost afraid to know.”

“Come here. You should see this.”

She pushed herself to her feet and went over to him. He pulled back the drapes, and the sight that greeted her was unnerving.

A cavalcade was promenading toward them. There was a procession of horsemen in full livery, their horses decorated with ribbons and braiding. They were leading several fancy coaches that sported ornate crests on the doors. Each coach had a contingent of outriders, the men also decked out in full livery.

“Who on earth is that?” she said.

Jackson didn’t explain, but grabbed her wrist and dragged her outside without her bothering to fetch cloak or bonnet. It was chilly, but she didn’t notice the cold.

The vehicles rattled to a halt. Outriders jumped down to whip doors open and set the steps.

An incredibly handsome older gentleman was the first to appear. At fifty or so, he was slender and dapper, with a head of blond hair that had faded to silver. His wealth was obvious, his coat and trousers expensive and impeccably tailored, his fingers covered with gaudy rings that sparkled so brilliantly the stones had to be real diamonds.

An outrider approached and asked, “Miss Graves?”

“Yes, I’m Miss Graves.”

With a flourish of his arm to the gentleman, he said, “I present Neville Stone, Earl of Swindon.”

Hannah’s jaw dropped in amazement. Hunter’s father? In her driveway?

It was definitely him, and he was clearly possessed of a strong bloodline, for he provided a riveting picture of what Hunter would look like in a few decades. If they’d been standing together, they could have been the same man, but twenty years apart in age.

Hannah wasn’t sure if she was supposed to curtsy to him or not, but she was so astonished that she dipped down and said, “Welcome to

Parkhurst, Lord Swindon.”

“It’s my pleasure to have visited.” He raised her up and motioned to his carriage where a woman was climbing out. “I believe you’re acquainted with my dear friend, Sybil Jones.”

“Miss Jones!” Hannah said. “What a lovely surprise. I’m flattered and stunned that you’d travel such a distance merely to call on me.”

Miss Jones walked over, and she clasped Hannah’s hands and kissed her on the cheek. They were business associates, so it was a terribly personal gesture that was a tad disconcerting.

“I heard about your shop and your other troubles,” Miss Jones said, “and I’ve been so worried about you. When Neville mentioned he was coming, I simply had to ride along to check your condition. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Hannah replied, and she meant it.

“I also thought I should be here to furnish moral support.” Miss Jones chuckled. “This crew of males can be a bit overwhelming.”

It was then that Hannah glanced over at the other two coaches. Hunter emerged from one, and his brother, Warwick, emerged from the other. They marched over to Lord Swindon.

They were dressed in expensive clothes too, their fingers displaying even more lavish rings. They were flaunting themselves, flaunting their affluence and position. They expected her to be awed. And she was undeniably *awed*.

Hunter and Warwick were tall and handsome, younger versions of their attractive father. They slid next to Lord Swindon, one on each side, so she was pelted with a huge dose of masculine vigor.

There was a fourth carriage at the back of the line, and others were climbing out. Most notably, there was a vicar among them, but she was so delighted by Hunter’s return that the preacher’s presence barely registered.

“Hello, Hannah,” Hunter said. “It’s so good to see you again. I’m sorry I was delayed for such a lengthy interval.”

“It’s all right,” she told him. “You’re here now, and it’s grand to see you too.”

They grinned like halfwits, and she struggled to locate the fury she’d once harbored, but it had evaporated. She couldn’t be angry with him. Not with how he’d been kind to her, how he’d saved her.

He clasped her hands as Miss Jones had done, and he kissed her on the cheek too, but his father pulled Hunter away, saying, "We'll have none of that." Lord Swindon studied Hannah and asked, "Will you invite us in, Miss Graves? We have a vital subject to discuss with you."

"Oh, where are my manners? Yes, yes, please come in."

Lord Swindon slyly maneuvered himself between her and Hunter, and he took her arm to stroll with her as she led the group into the house. Lord Swindon was on one side of her, Jackson on the other, everyone else traipsing behind them, supplying the impression that the configuration had been rehearsed.

"Did you help to plan their fancy arrival?" she asked Jackson.

"Maybe."

Hannah peeked over her shoulder at Hunter. He winked, as if they shared a secret.

The butler formally greeted them at the door, and a phalanx of footmen lined the foyer so they paraded through a crowd on their way to the parlor. Most of the servants were Hunter's servants, so they knew him, as well as his father and brother. There were nods and smiles, and Lord Swindon patted a few men on the back as they passed by.

In the parlor, refreshments had been laid out, as if servants had been lurking down the hall and waiting for Jackson to whisk her away so they could prepare the room. There were several bottles of champagne on the sideboard, so apparently, a celebration was about to commence.

Jackson seemed to be in charge of the mischief, and she peered over at him and asked, "What's all this?"

"You'll find out in a minute."

Lord Swindon escorted her to the sofa and eased her down. He and Jackson stood in front of her. Miss Jones was behind Lord Swindon, and his two strapping sons flanked him again. The servants and outriders had flooded in after the main characters, so the space was filled to bursting.

"Miss Graves," the Earl started, "I have been in communication with your sibling, Mr. Jackson Graves. I am thrilled to report that he has offered your hand in marriage to my son and heir, Hunter."

Her jaw dropped again. "He what?"

The Earl continued. "I'm certain this has shocked you, but it did not shock me. For some months, I have been hoping to reach an agreement

with your kin regarding Hunter. We are excited by your brother's suggestion, and I'm confirming that the betrothal is official."

Hannah was almost too stunned to speak. Almost. She glared at Jackson and said, "You engaged me without my permission?"

He shrugged, looking impish and much too mature. "Well, if I've learned one thing about you, it's that you make very bad decisions. I couldn't allow you to make a decision about *this*. It's too important, and I am your only male relative. Why shouldn't I have proceeded?"

"Precisely," Lord Swindon said. "I proclaim my enthusiasm for this match and inform you that I would be delighted to have you join my family. Will you?"

The entire group was staring at her, anticipating her immediate and affirmative answer, but she was frozen with hesitation. It wasn't that she didn't want to be Hunter's wife. It seemed to have been the path of her whole life—where she'd finally arrived in this very spot.

She loved him, she didn't. She was desperate to marry him, she wasn't. She thought he was wonderful, she wasn't sure. She'd never been happier, she'd never been more miserable. Hunter Stone was simply a man who stirred conflicting emotions, and she had no idea how to respond.

To buy time, she glanced at Rebecca and said, "Did you know about this?"

"Yes, and I heartily approve of Jackson's actions."

Lord Swindon said, "I realize, Miss Graves, that you have reservations about Hunter, and I should apprise you—out of my three boys—he's always been my favorite. He can be wicked and wild, but he's loyal and generous to a fault. If you wed him, I'd never have to worry about you."

Hunter smirked and elbowed his brother, murmuring, "I told you I was his favorite. You didn't believe me."

The nudge propelled Warwick forward and he said, "When I was here previously, Miss Graves, I didn't have an opportunity to become acquainted with you. I traveled with my father today to tell you that Hunter can be pompous and exhausting, but deep down, he's a terrific fellow. If you were my sister, I would advise you to grab hold of him and never let go. Won't you please be my sister-in-law?"

Miss Jones piped in with, "I'd like to add my opinion too. Hunter is



a cad, and he's proud of it, but haven't you heard? Cads make the best husbands. I've seen it happen over and over. If you were my daughter, I would be dancing with joy to discover he's besotted."

Lord Swindon spoke up yet again. "You have no parent to guide you in this situation, so may I take your father's place? I was cordial with Sir Edmund, and I can emphatically attest that he would have been elated with this arrangement. Allow me to stand in his stead and urge you to accept Hunter's proposal."

How could she ignore such a declaration? It had absolutely riveted her.

There was a pause, where everyone waited again for her reply, but she couldn't imagine what it should be. She couldn't decline the offer, not with so many eager observers scrutinizing her every move, but they might have been swiftly pushing her across a bog and hoping she wouldn't notice the pitfalls along the route.

She was awash with trepidation. What about his doxies? What about his mistresses? What about his odious friends?

Mr. Carew had been pummeled and sent away, but there had to be many others.

Hunter wallowed in the demimonde, a world filled with rogues and slatterns, and she was anxious to ask about all of them. What about Isabella Darling? What about his mistress interviews and his penchant for debauchery? But how could she raise any of those topics when the room was packed with his family and servants?

Hunter stepped to her, and he clasped her hand and lifted her to her feet.

"Your mind is working furiously," he said, "as you think of reasons to refuse."

"I'm not thinking that."

He snorted with amusement. "We're making progress."

"It's just that you've overwhelmed me."

"I keep explaining to you that I *am* overwhelming, so I'm not surprised."

"You're so humble too," she facetiously said.

"I will try to be more humble—just for you." His expression turned somber for once. "I have a few things to say to you."

"I have a few things to say too, but they're not subjects I can address

in front of so many witnesses.”

“I know what they are.” He sounded extremely arrogant, as if her qualms could be easily brushed away. “Will this assuage your doubts? I can be conceited, bossy, and negligent. I blame my awful habits on my dreadful upbringing, where I never had to follow any rules.”

Lord Swindon scoffed. “I can’t deny it. I was a horrid parent.”

“Yes, you were,” Hunter concurred, but affectionately. “My father can vouch for me. My brother too. I’m a kind, devoted, and high-spirited person. I might seem lazy and detached, but I’m actually tough and driven, and I never back down from a fight. I’m reliable too and amazingly faithful.”

Lord Swindon harumphed. “He’s received nearly all of my good traits and almost none of my bad ones.”

“I want to take care of you forever, Hannah Graves,” Hunter said. “I’m rich enough to do that. I want you standing by my side, each and every day for the rest of my life. If you don’t want that too, I can’t fathom how I’ll carry on without you.”

“Your words are fascinating to me, but I’m so perplexed. With your father’s elevation, you could pick any woman in the world. Maybe even a princess or a queen. Why would you choose *me*?”

“You really don’t know?”

“No. I have no idea what’s shoved you out onto this ledge.”

He chuckled, his gaze warm and fond. “I love you, you silly girl. Why else would I have struggled so hard to persuade you?”

It was such a shocking admission. If she’d had a hundred pounds to bet, she’d have wagered he didn’t believe in love and didn’t deem it to be a genuine sentiment. Could he possibly be telling the truth? And if he was, where did that leave her?

“You...you...*love* me?” she stammered.

“Yes, you annoying minx. It’s why I brought my father with me, so he could bolster my case. I realize you don’t view me as much of a catch —”

“I never thought that!” she huffed.

“—so I decided I should tender a bribe to win you over.”

A servant had been clutching a folder, and he gave it to Hunter. Hunter opened it and retrieved a drawing. He showed it to her, and it seemed to be a sketch of her bookshop in London. A sign was hung,

announcing it to be, *The First Page*, but there were numerous differences added: four windows instead of two, the door painted green rather than black.

“What this?” she asked, her sense of bewilderment growing by leaps and bounds.

“It’s my bribe.” He grinned his devil’s grin. “Your shop burned down in London, and I figured you should have a new one, so...I built one for you.”

“You what?”

“I built you another bookshop, which is why I was too busy to return any sooner.”

“Are you mad?” She was astounded. Who wouldn’t love such a precious, considerate man?

“It’s in Marston village though, next to the coaching inn, where there is plenty of traffic to furnish you with customers. It can be yours, but you’ll have to move to Marston to claim it.” He pulled a key out of his coat, and he dangled it out of reach. “What do you think? This is a key to the front door. Would you like to restart your business in Marston? It would come with one condition though.”

“What condition?”

“You have to be my wife.” Before she could reply, he dropped to one knee and took her hand in his. “My dearest, Hannah”—he stared up at her, his eyes brimming with mischief—“will you marry me?”

She burst into tears; she couldn’t help it. It was all too much: his father and brother, Miss Jones, Jackson and Rebecca, the servants. They were all ready to celebrate, so she felt as if she had a huge, extended family spurring her on.

“You *still* want to marry me?” she asked, even though she was blubbering like a baby. “After all that happened between us, you’re still willing?”

“I was never *unwilling*. If I remember correctly, *you* were the one who was opposed. Have I changed your mind? Tell me I have.”

His brother produced a kerchief and slipped it to Hunter. Hunter rose and used it to dry her tears. Then Lord Swindon passed her something else, and she saw that it was a pretty gold ring, with an emerald stone in the center. Hunter slid it onto her finger and it fit perfectly.

“It was his mother’s,” Lord Swindon said.

Hunter told her, "I've been a confirmed bachelor. I've reveled in my wicked antics, but *you*, Hannah Graves, have made me realize that I can't bear to be alone anymore. It is this cad's wish that you save me from myself."

"In case you're about to refuse him, Miss Graves," Lord Swindon put in, "you should recall that Jackson and I have already settled the matter." He gestured behind him. "We've brought a vicar and a Special License, so we can accomplish the ceremony right away. We were supposed to hold it at eleven, but we Stone men like to break the rules."

"You'd like to wed me...now?" Hannah asked Hunter.

"In light of our history, I can't give you any extra time to ponder the situation. I've learned that—with you—delay can be fatal to my happiness."

She peered out at the assembled crowd. They were sure she'd agree. And hadn't he bragged, from the very start, that he always got his way? How could she expect this occasion to be any different?

She couldn't ever seem to be shed of him. Whenever she tried to separate herself, the universe would simply drag him back into her path. Apparently, she had a destiny with him, and it led directly to him being her husband.

He could be horrid and pompous, could be vain and aggravating. He had loose morals and even looser attitudes and habits. But he was also funny, caring, and generous. He could be sweet and determined and really quite wonderful.

What if she wed him and she was glad forever? She thought she might be.

"Bribe accepted," she said.

"What does that mean?"

She grabbed the key from him, as she looked out at all of the spectators. They were waiting with bated breath for her response, and she liked keeping them in suspense.

Then she rested her gaze on Hunter, the most handsome, dynamic, and stunning man she'd ever met. She smiled and said, "Yes, you wicked rogue, I will grant you your cad's wish. I will marry you—right now."

"You better not be joking."

"I'm incredibly serious—and could we hurry please? I'm shaking so

hard, I'm afraid I might fall down."

"You'll never fall down," he said. "Not with me walking beside you. I will always be there to hold you up."

"I know you will. Aren't I lucky?"

There was a fraught pause, where people froze, confused over whether it was finished, then he whooped with joy and kissed her soundly, twirling her in circles as everyone laughed and cheered.

He set her on her feet, and he appeared so smug that she could only laugh too.

"I was certain I could convince you," he said. "I never had any doubt."

"Neither did I," she agreed. "Where you're concerned, I never stood a chance."

THE END

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She's also a lawyer and mom, and at age forty, with two babies at home, she started a new career as a commercial fiction writer. She'd hoped to be a suspense novelist, but couldn't sell any of her manuscripts, so she ended up taking a detour into romance where she was stunned to discover that she has a knack for writing some of the world's greatest love stories.

Her books have been released to wide acclaim, and she has won or been nominated for many national awards. She is considered to be one of the masters of the romance genre. For many years, she was hailed as “The Queen of Erotic Romance”, and she’s also revered as “The International Queen of Villains.” She is particularly proud to have been named “Best Storyteller of the Year” by the trade magazine Romantic Times BOOK Reviews.

She lives and writes in Hollywood, California, and she loves to hear from fans. Visit her website at [www.cherylholt.com](http://www.cherylholt.com).

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